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The purpose of this thesis is to explore the widely differing circumstances under which misanthropy flourishes. A short story collection, this thesis follows characters from various walks of life. Protagonists include a high school student, an accountant-turned-restaurateur, an ad designer, a public school spokeswoman and a veteran narcotics officer. Despite holding different values and living different lives under different sets of circumstances, each character is a victim or perpetrator (or, in some cases, both) of an unquestionably cruel act.

In presenting these stories as a single collection, this thesis will challenge conventional notions of innocence and culpability. All characters, no matter how sympathetic or well-intentioned, have a hand in whatever tragedy befalls them and others. As such, this thesis attempts to synthesize a Hobbesian view of human nature (animalistic and cruel, hence the title) with a Randian/existentialist recognition of the individual as the ultimate arbiter of his or her own destiny.

ANIMAL CRUELTY

by

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ANIMAL CRUELTY

My little brother called me the other day to let me know he's getting married. He didn't ask me to be best man at the wedding, thank God, but I suppose I'll have to make some kind of speech or toast anyway. That worries me. I have no idea what I should say, only what I shouldn't say.

It's not that I'm worried about embarrassing him. God knows that's what big brothers are for. No, I'm concerned that I'll approach it like the ad copy I churn out for a living. I'll be charming and funny and supportive. I'll wow them with lines about the brightness of their future and the joys of married life. I'll be spot-on and it will make me queasy. My stomach has never let me get away with anything, at least not since Syd.

When I was 10 and Joe was 7, we harassed our parents into getting us a cat. After weighing our options at the local animal shelter, we decided on an orange-and-white shorthair, less than a year old. We didn't know that it was a boy at first, so we called it Sydney or Syd, just to be on the safe side.

Within a few months, it became clear to me that cat ownership wasn't all it cracked up to be. Syd didn't do much. He would chase a ball on occasion if you threw one past him, but mostly he just slept and whined for food. I felt cheated. We should have asked for a dog.

My frustration with Syd reached its peak one infernal day in late July. It was nut-roasting hot, at least 92 with high humidity, the kind of day where you go shirtless and end up drinking most of a pitcher of Kool-Aid and sleeping directly in front of a box fan. By midday, Joe and I were drenched with sweat, Mom had taken refuge across the street with the Ambroses and their A/C, and Syd was fast asleep on the windowsill. I watched the cat doze complacently, paws and tail tucked under his body like a loaf of feline bread while he soaked up the sun.

I shook my head. It wasn't fair. How come the cat got to relax on a day like this when the rest of us were suffering? I thought about giving Syd a good, hard poke to wake him, but then I got another idea.

"Come on," I told Joe. "We're playing catch."

Syd wasn't happy about being woken up from his nap, but he offered no resistance as I scooped him into my arms and headed out the door.

"What'd you bring Syd out here for?" Joe asked me once we'd reached the yard.

"I told you, we're playing catch," I said.

It took Joe a minute to understand and when he did, his face twisted up in disapproval.

"I dunno," he said. "I don't think Syd'll like that too much."

"Well, we're about to find out."

With that, I cocked my arms back and heaved Syd in Joe's general direction. The cat let out a yelp but landed unscathed a few feet in front of where Joe was standing. I

was disappointed. Joe made no effort to catch him. In fact, he took a few steps back to provide some landing space.

“Now you throw him back to me,” I said.

“I don’t wanna, Charlie,” Joe said in that dreaded little brother whine of his.

“They land on their feet anyway,” I told him. I sounded assured, learned, very matter-of-fact. “Now toss me the cat.”

Joe hesitated a moment, but when I repeated my request, he took hold of the cat and pitched it forward. I don’t know whether Joe was afraid of causing some injury or was just that weak at the time, but Syd didn’t go very far. He landed roughly in the center of the distance between us, looked around and meowed in confusion.

Mission accomplished – Syd was good and rattled. Still, I couldn’t quite bring myself to stop. We weren’t *hurting* him, I told myself, just shaking him up a bit. He always got right back up after we threw him. Besides, I was having fun.

“OK,” I said, picking Syd up for another round. The cat was squirming and squeaking a lot, but he didn’t think to scratch or bite me. Somehow, that only increased my contempt for him. He could break away if he wanted to, I thought. He just wasn’t trying hard enough. “I want you to actually catch him this time. I’ll throw it nice and high for you.”

“Charlie...” Joe began.

“Just do it,” I said. Joe was getting on my nerves. Not only was he wussing out on me, but he was trying to make me feel bad about the game we were playing. I wasn’t going to let him guilt me out of it, though. I was going to show him that it was OK.

I cocked my arms back, took a step forward and launched Syd underhand into the sky. I wasn't lying when I said it would be a high throw. It was so high that the cat sailed right over Joe's head when he moved in for the catch. Syd landed on the grass behind him, turned, hissed at us, and took off for the row of trees beyond the yard.

"Darn it," I said. "Go get the cat, Joe."

"You get him," said Joe.

"Get the cat," I repeated, raising my voice.

"You get him, Charlie."

We went back and forth like this for a minute or two. I threatened to hit him, he threatened to tell on me. I used the possibility of Syd getting away from us to pressure him while he reminded me it would be my fault if that happened. In the end, I caved and said I'd do it. I could have forced Joe, there was no question about that. But the game had been my idea. That meant, like it or not, it was my responsibility to end it.

I took a few tentative steps into the trees, looked around and called Syd's name. There was no sign of him, so I took a few more steps and repeated the call. Tiny black insects flew at my arms and face and I slapped and swatted them away. I could hear buzzing and birdcalls, but no telltale meow from Syd.

Technically speaking, the trees were off-limits. "Who knows what's back there?" Mom reminded us often. This should have only heightened my curiosity, but the truth was that I didn't like being back there either. When I was really little, I feared boogeymen and bears; on the day Syd took off, I was worried about beestings and bug

bites. That and the unbearable heat made me want to get out fast, but I couldn't until the cat was found.

"Syd!" I called once more. I was far enough into the trees that I could make out the stretch of road on the other side. I half-expected to see an orange blur darting along the asphalt, but of course the cat never materialized. That's when it hit me that Syd was gone for good and I nearly blew chunks all over the nearest tree trunk.

None of this was supposed to happen. It was just a game. I couldn't have known that stupid Syd would take off like that. Besides, Joe was just as much to blame as I was for failing to stop me. What was Mom doing leaving us alone that day, anyway? Come to think of it, she and Dad never should have gotten us a cat to begin with. I blamed and I blamed and I blamed, but I still felt sick to my stomach.

Fifteen years later and I was still petless. I'd gone away for college, landed a marketing job and lived alone. My friends were getting engaged and married left and right, but I preferred the single life. I didn't like being nailed down. I wanted to live my own life, not serve as an accessory to someone else's. The thought of doing things as a *couple* with other *couples* depressed the hell out of me. I didn't see why everyone was in such a big rush to formalize everything, anyway. Our 20s were supposed to be about experimenting, trying things out, finding what worked and what didn't. Commitment, obligation, routine – those all felt like middle-aged enterprises.

Of course, sticking to my guns on this cost me a few relationships. More than one woman left me because I neglected to mark anniversaries and rolled my eyes during

discussions of *our future*. “It’s not that you’re a bad guy,” one woman put it, “but if you won’t take *us* seriously, how can I take *you* seriously?” I told her to have fun contributing to America’s already-high divorce rate.

I wasn’t expecting to meet anyone who shared my attitude, at least not for a good long while, but I did anyway, in the Coliseum parking lot before a Lacuna Coil show. Her name was Ursula. She looked a little bit like the band’s frontwoman, raven-haired and full-lipped with killer eyebrows. I told her as much, leaving out the part about her being a good 15 pounds heavier.

“Too bad I don’t have her pipes,” she replied. She was leaning against the sticker-plastered bumper of a midnight blue Ford, smoking a cigarette.

“We all have our own talents,” I told her.

“Oh yeah?” she asked. “What’s yours?”

“I’m in marketing, so it would be lying to people,” I said, calling on one of my standard pick-up lines. “But don’t take my word for it.”

I was hoping for laughter, which I usually got, and expecting at least a smile. Instead, she half-chuckled, half-snorted and told me to give her my hand. I hesitated. Was she going to read my fortune? Thumbwrestle? Put her cigarette out on my palm?

She ended up writing her phone number in black ink across the back of my hand.

“You’d be funny,” she said, “if you didn’t try so hard.”

We had dinner at this Asian place which put its menus on cloth scrolls and served unbelievable jasmine green tea. They also had a giant fish in a tank and we took care to

taunt it just before leaving, waving and tapping the glass when no one was looking. It was long and primordial and ugly as hell. Neither of us had a clue what it was.

During the meal, I'd learned that Ursula would be difficult to offend. She had three brothers, she told me, so she was used to all sorts of boneheaded male shenanigans. I also learned that she worked in cosmetics (which explained the copious amount of eye shadow she had on) and was something of a gypsy. Her family moved around frequently when she was growing up and she'd yet to lay down roots as an adult.

"Army brat?" I asked.

"Civilian brat," she replied, flinging a balled-up straw wrapper at me. I looked for my own so I could return fire, but it was nowhere to be found.

"I'm thinking about moving again, actually," she told me. "There's not enough to do around here."

"Stick around a little while longer," I insisted. "I bet there's a lot happening right under your nose that you don't even know about."

"What, do you work for the city or something?"

"Used to," I told her. "They don't pay worth a damn."

I was liking this girl a lot by that point, but not nearly enough to make me rethink my philosophy. Even though I didn't want to get all heavy on her on our first date, I did feel some obligation to tell her we weren't in it for the long haul. Surprisingly, she beat me to the punch.

“Listen,” she said as we got up to leave. “This has been fun and all, but I’m really not looking for a serious relationship or anything. Been there, done that. It’s not for me right now. I just thought you should know.”

“OK.”

“Just OK?”

“Yeah, why?”

She shrugged.

“Guys are forever trying to change my mind on this,” she explained. “They think they’re the one who will bring me to the light or whatever. When they find out they’re not, they get all pissy.”

“I don’t want to change anything,” I told her. “Like you said, it’s been fun.”

Thus marked the beginning of our non-relationship relationship. We would go out to dinner at moderately priced restaurants or to smokeless, hipster-free bars or she would come over to my place or I would go to hers. We would watch widescreen movies and drink Belgian beer and listen to music which suited our equally eclectic tastes (everything from free jazz to vintage techno to Scandinavian death metal). It always ended with us fucking like jackrabbits and laying exhausted afterwards in a sweaty tangle of high thread-count sheets, her dark hair strewn across me like a pelt. And when we weren’t screwing or digging on each other’s eccentricities, we would laugh and tell stories and jeer the imbeciles of the world.

I even told Ursula about Syd, which wasn't exactly my finest hour. But if she could stand to listen to me explain how I'd managed to chase away a childhood pet, then it seemed as if there was nothing about me she wouldn't accept.

"I was hot and bored and...I don't know," I said. "Just watching him laze around all the time, it got to me. Besides, I didn't really think I was hurting him. It wasn't like I was tossing old Syd off the roof or setting him on fire or poking him with sticks. And when I realized he wasn't coming back, I felt bad about it. No nightmares, but I didn't want to be around anybody else's pets after that."

"You were a mean little shit," she said, but with enough affection to let me know she forgave me.

The one thing we did not do to each other was apply pressure. Dates were not taken for granted, expectations were not elevated, intricate and elaborate plans were avoided at all costs. We always called to see if the other was busy. And if it turned out the other was, we accepted it. We tried our damndest to keep things drama-free. Let our true-blue friends and our drinking buddies share in our troubles. We were out to have fun.

I suspected Ursula was seeing other men on nights she wasn't seeing me. As this had no bearing on her willingness to *keep* seeing me, it didn't bother me in the least. To be honest, I enjoyed the breaks we got from one another. There were some evenings I just wanted to lounge around in my underwear and play Call of Duty with Paganini playing in the background or hang out with my guy friends and debate the comparative attractiveness of Ann Hathaway and every other woman on the planet or, God forbid,

actually call my parents. My arrangement with Ursula seemed perfect for that, for everything really. We wanted so little from each other we couldn't help but make it work.

About a month and a half in to this glorious status quo, Ursula temporarily lost use of her apartment and asked if she could stay with me for nearly two weeks.

"They're spraying for bugs and fixing a few things," she explained. "A lot of things, actually. The whole damn building is falling apart. Anyway, it's either you or my friend's couch and that couch is nasty."

"Fine by me," I told her.

I was half-lying at the time. The truth was that I resented the change in our arrangement. I was worried I'd feel crowded. I didn't want MAC brushes and makeup samples strewn around the apartment and I didn't want to discover black hairs in my bathroom sink. I didn't want my kitchen invaded by the pungent smells of unauthorized cooking. I didn't want to court scrutiny or uncertainty. I didn't want her around me all the time, but I was having too good a time with her to say no.

As it turned out, I had nothing to worry about. We both worked during the day and my evenings lacked wanderlust. I felt no overpowering need to get away just because Ursula was in my space. In fact, I liked having her there, even when we weren't trying to have fun.

In many ways, we complimented each other. We were a good team in the kitchen, for instance, precisely because neither one of us really knew how to cook with any flair. Ursula was Greco-Polish but couldn't tell spanikopita from pierogi. I was as white as

white could be and lacked both family recipes and the discipline needed to follow them. Together, however, we were able to whip up lasagna and chicken marsala and even a couple of pies. Ursula chopped veggies and tackled sauces while I handled meat and carbs. We took turns doing dishes and reaped the rewards.

That wasn't to say there weren't adjustments that needed to be made. Ursula couldn't get enough of *American Idol*, which I detested. And she rolled her eyes every time my favorite, *Mad Men*, came on ("You only like it because it makes marketing look important and cool," she told me). But we made allowances for each other's favorite TV shows. We also got used to morning hair and morning temperaments, committed to memory how each of us took our coffee (mine: cream, hers: black) and sped up our shower times so neither of us would be late for work. We even started hypothesizing (in jest, of course) about the kind of house we'd get: something with lots of columns, an in-ground pool, and a fireplace.

We had all the trappings of a regular couple save for officialdom and, to my surprise, I found that I liked it. It brought me no joy to admit that I might function well in a lasting relationship. It seemed to give validation to all the naysayers — those smug, know-it-all friends who rejected my philosophy over the years and told me I was just waiting for the right woman to come along.

At the same time, I myself felt validated. A relationship built on a desire to avoid the pitfalls of serious relationships had a better chance of succeeding. So far, Ursula and I had avoided any serious talk of our future. No overtures were made toward meeting the parents and we didn't buy each other silly gifts. We would not be sucked into the

doldrums of routine. We would find ways to keep this fun. And if we ever needed to take a break, we would handle it like adults, not like lovesick teenagers drawn to fits of obsession.

I was reluctant to bring up our status with Ursula until after she got her apartment back. That way, if it turned out we weren't on the same page, I wouldn't have to deal with the awkwardness that followed. But the more I thought about it, the more I didn't want to wait. If I broached this with her while she was still with me, she could still see the upside. Once she got back to her apartment and the rest of her life, it would be that much easier for her to put me on the backburner.

During our last few days together, I kept looking for opportunities to raise the subject. Every time I thought I had an opening, however, I thought of a reason not to do it. After sex was no good – that would send the wrong message. I nearly came clean at dinner one night, but the Italian restaurant we chose was inexplicably crowded. Packed with laughing, boisterous families, it was exactly the kind of place I didn't want to be if things didn't go well. I tried again later that night when we were watching television and actually made it to “Ursula, we...” before she shushed me. Another one of her favorite shows was on. Damn it to hell!

The next day, a Tuesday, was her last at my place. She had off from work, while I was stuck putting the finishing touches on a publicity package for a pest control company. It wasn't my account – I had a pair of car dealerships and a failing grocery store to worry about – but a colleague had put together a pamphlet and wanted another set of eyes on it.

“I really don’t have time to mess with the bug brigade, Bill,” I told him. He rattled off a litany of favors he’d done for me over the past few months, things like tracking down stock photos and pretending to be a satisfied customer to sway potential clients, until I agreed to take a look.

The pamphlet was clean and free of typos. Bill got the company’s name and contact info on the front, but he didn’t load up on unnecessary text. A list of the company’s services followed on the first inside fold, but the opposite page was what really seized my attention. The fold featured a picture of a smiling, nozzle-wielding exterminator in a white uniform. RECLAIM YOUR HOME TODAY appeared in bold beneath the image. It was the word “home” that got to me. For most of us, there was only one.

That brought me back to Ursula and our non-relationship. After nearly two weeks at my place, she was had to be aching to get back to hers. She would then probably want some time apart, to decompress. And then what? Maybe she’d had enough of me. Maybe any more and it would stop being fun. Understandable, I guess, but I didn’t want her to go. I’d miss her too much. I’d miss the meals we cooked, her half-giggle, half-snort when I said something inappropriate, the weight of her face on my chest when we slept, our mock-grappling over the TV remote, the fact that she didn’t urge me to get a dog, the floral scent of her shampoo and her utter lack of contempt for the way I’d lived my life so far.

“A crisis of confidence,” I muttered to myself.

“What was that?” Bill asked. He’d been milling around impatiently, trying to get me to hurry up on reviewing the pamphlet.

“Nothing,” I replied. “If anyone comes looking for me, tell them I stepped out.”

Ursula’s sticker-covered Ford was in the parking lot when I got home and I expected to find her in front of the TV. She liked to lounge on my white loveseat with her feet up while she nibbled on wasabi rice cracker mix. When I didn’t find her there, I guessed the bathroom. I was wrong — she emerged from the bedroom instead. She had on a long pale gray T with no pants and her morning hair. I began to feel all kinds of sick. It was like someone had set up a trampoline in my intestines and scheduled a child’s birthday party.

“You’re home early,” she said. She sounded surprised. Not annoyed or deeply apologetic, just surprised.

“Who’s the guy?” I asked. I wanted to snarl. I wanted my voice to ooze venom. But the rising sickness twisted my indignation into an ugly, pitiful whine.

“Yo, Steve,” she called.

Steve at least had the courtesy to dress before leaving my bedroom. He looked about 40. His neatly-trimmed goatee was flecked with gray. His girth and his silver-rimmed glasses gave him a parochial, judgelike appearance. I hated him immensely.

“Well?” I asked.

“Oh,” Ursula said, blushing slightly. “Charlie, this is Steve. Steve, this is Charlie.”

“Hey,” Steve said. He might have looked like a judge, but his voice was pure slacker; affable, relaxed and indifferent. He offered me a hand, which I refused to shake.

“What the fuck?” I said. I was struggling to control myself, to play it cool, to be the type of person I said I always would be in a situation like this. It wasn’t working.

“This is my Tuesday thing,” Ursula told me, as if fucking Steve was an aerobics class or a book discussion group or a grief counseling appointment.

“In my bed, though?” I said. “Jesus.”

“Mine’s out of commission,” she said.

“You could have waited a day,” I hissed. It was getting bad. I kept trying to remind myself that we were in a non-relationship, that this shouldn’t matter, that it was the surprise that was getting to me and nothing more, but nothing seemed to be working. I was mad: mad at Ursula, mad at Steve, mad at me for allowing this to happen. All the gloss and distortion I practiced for a living proved incapable of changing what I felt.

Ursula muttered something about washing the sheets, but I had already begun to tune her out. There was no recovering from this. Even when I stopped being mad at her – and I knew that I would – I wouldn’t stop thinking about her and Steve or her and whoever her Thursday and sometimes-Friday things were.

“Well?” I asked Steve. “You homeless or something? What’s your excuse?”

“Married, bro,” he answered. He lifted up his hand to show me the ring and I was back in the trees all over again. I opened my mouth to issue some snide comeuppance, but instead I promptly puked all over the floor.

As far as I know, the girl Joe ended up with has never cheated on him. Her name is Heidi. I haven't met her, but he makes her sound great, great for him, at least. She's studying to be a pediatrician, her family owns a winery (a small one, but still) and she speaks three languages. What she's doing with my little brother is beyond me.

I'll fly up for the wedding, I'm sure. If Heidi isn't intolerable in person, I'll probably drop in on them every now and then. Maybe Thanksgiving. We'll have Tofurkey (they're both vegetarians). Their kids will call me Uncle Charlie and I'll sneak them candy and other things their parents don't want them to have. They will have a pet, of course – a big golden retriever or maybe a chocolate Lab.

SLAP

The first Andrea heard of the slap was when Dan Baker at the *Progress* called to ask if it had actually happened.

“I’ve got a parent telling me a teacher at Central slapped a student,” he said. “Name’s Roman. You hear anything about that?”

Andrea sighed. This was either a stupid prank or gossip run amuck. Unfortunately, it came with the territory. Just last year, she had to quell a rumor that a principal had been fired for sexual harassment. The truth was that he’d left to take a better-paying job in another district.

“I haven’t heard anything,” she said. “But I can certainly look into it.”

“Sure,” Dan said. “Just get back to me by five or you’re going in as ‘did not return calls seeking comment.’ You know how Victor is.”

“I’ll get back to you, Dan,” she said and hung up. She knew how Victor was. Two years after leaving the paper and she could still see the man, gangly and hairy-armed, sidling up to her with a litany of edits he wanted to see made. Another ten years could pass and she would not forget the way he leered at her and made her uneasy, telling her at annual evaluation time that she had great potential, “potential” rolling off his tongue like line of ants marching up her leg.

Thinking about Victor was enough to make her queasy, so she focused on Dan's call instead. It came in a little past one, just before she returned from lunch. She had heard nothing all morning about any kind of incident at Central and if anything had happened on her lunch hour, someone would have tracked her down or reached her on her cell. It had to be some bad information. Had to be.

Nevertheless, due diligence sent her to seek out Dr. Price. She was worried the superintendent would be on-site at one of the schools, but she found him in his office instead, signing what she could only imagine were contracts. It was that time of year again.

Like Victor, Dr. Price was a difficult man to work for. It was odd, Andrea thought, given how little alike they were. Victor carried himself like a marionette under the control of a drunken puppeteer; Dr. Price was small and graceful. Victor was loudly insistent – “This *needs* a quote” or “Get *somebody* to comment” – while Dr. Price was coldly minimalistic. What little instruction he gave – “See to it, then” — carried that much more weight. The problem with both men, Andrea thought, was one of distance: Victor was always there, always hovering around her, while Dr. Price acted as if he never had the time. She did not expect every person she worked for to be her friend, but just once she wanted a boss who didn't make her feel like she was always doing something wrong.

“Andrea,” he said, his eyes barely leaving the desk.

“Sorry to bother you,” Andrea said, “but Dan Baker at the *Progress* asked me about a teacher at Central slapping a student. It's probably nothing, but...”

“We’re taking care of it,” Dr. Price said quietly.

Andrea felt like she’d been slapped herself. A teacher striking a student was a potential black eye for the school system, yet nobody thought to inform the lowly community relations officer? She was only the official media contact, after all. Nope, no reason why she should know anything.

“What happened?” she asked.

“We’re looking into that,” Dr. Price told her. It sounded a lot like “we’re taking care of it,” and Andrea sensed that was all she was going to get from him right now.

“What should I tell Dan?”

“You can tell him that the matter is being investigated and that we take any allegations of violence against students very, very seriously.”

“Right,” Andrea said. Sadly, this was not the first time something like this had happened. A few months into the job, an assistant principal at one of the middle schools had confiscated some cocaine from a seventh-grader. She’d heard nothing about it until a *Progress* reporter – the crime beat writer, that time – called seeking comment. She’d immediately gone to Dr. Price seeking an apology. Not being told about things like that made her look stupid, she explained, and prevented her from doing her job. In the future, she should be among the first to know.

“You will know everything you need to know,” Dr. Price had told her, emphasizing “need” in a way which left her with little optimism.

Now, on the day of the slap, Andrea felt even more pessimistic. She hadn’t made very much money as a reporter covering the school system and she detested working for

Victor, but that job at least allowed her to feel occasionally useful. Since making the jump to P.R., her pay increased slightly, but she spent too many days sitting in an office waiting to be made a fool of.

“Dan will want to know if there’s been any change in employment status,” she said. “The teacher’s, I mean.”

“We don’t discuss personnel matters,” Dr. Price reminded her, his voice practically polar in its chilliness. “You know that.”

“That much is public record,” she said, staving off the urge to add, “you know that.”

Dr. Price pushed his silver-framed reading glasses higher onto his nose. Silver glasses, dark suit (black or Navy or gray), dark shoes – these were his hallmarks. Andrea swore he only wore bright colors once or twice a year. If she were a little girl in one of his schools, she would probably find him terrifying. She wasn’t entirely sure that wasn’t his intent.

“There has been no change in Miss Roman’s status,” he said. “Will there be anything else?”

“No,” Andrea replied, scuttling back to her desk. When she reached her seat, she exhaled deeply, the air fleeing her lungs like a weightless refugee.

When David left eight months earlier, they sold the house and split the proceeds. Andrea took her half and moved into the top floor of a rented Colonial Revival on River Street. The money she saved went into her long-term relocation fund. She hoped to one

day swap the coast for the mountains and go back to school. The life she envisioned for herself involved teaching literature to bright and eager students at a small liberal arts college – the kind of place where there were five trees for every building – while she worked on her first book, drinking wine with a close and comfortably manageable group of friends who would drown out her bad memories with their easy laughter and occasional brilliance and, eventually, if she could find the time, remarrying.

The life she led now saw her spending an increasing number of nights alone — strange given that she'd moved into town from out in the country. The house on River Street, which she rented from an older couple and shared with a retired aircraft mechanic a floor below, had been a concession to her father, the type of person who could not stomach the idea of a woman living in a house alone with nary a man to keep her.

“I worry about you, is all,” he'd said a week or so after Andrea told him she and David were through.

“I'll be fine,” Andrea told him, angrier then at the man who raised her than the man who cast her aside.

“I know, honey, I know,” her father continued. “It's just that you've always kept to yourself and with David gone...”

That's when Andrea knew she'd have no peace if she stayed out in the country, if she didn't do things her father's way. She gave in. It was something she'd been doing a lot of the past few years, to the point where the girl who stepped onto a playground and challenged every boy in sight to a game of hoops was hardly recognizable anymore. That girl was fearless – a far cry from the woman she had eventually become.

Andrea was at a loss for explaining this shift. She supposed it was a gradual give-and-take, a concession here and there. Somewhere along the line, her returns started diminishing, and fighting for what she wanted, what she deserved just became so *tiring*. Her last boyfriend before David wanted to go skinny dipping at Kerr Lake State Park and Andrea agreed, not because she particularly wanted to, but because she wasn't ready to break up with him just yet and she didn't want to deal with the hurt looks and subtle resentment that came with saying "no."

"You're too smart to keep being someone else's lackey," David had told her the day she backed down from Dr. Price over the drug seizure.

She believed then that he was right, that she was smart and capable and deserved a doctorate and a better job and a new professional beginning. But a couple months later, he would put the lie to all of that.

The article in the *Progress* didn't tell Andrea much about what had actually happened. According to an unnamed school employee, Kim Roman, a third-grade teacher at Central Elementary, had slapped one of her students across the face. "Maybe the boy was mouthing off," the employee said. "But no child deserves that."

The student was not identified and calls to the Roman household were not returned. The school system declined to comment on the alleged slap, except to say that it was under investigation. "We take any allegations of violence against students very, very seriously," said Alvin Price, superintendent – Dr. Price's words to Andrea to Dan, verbatim.

Andrea saw the article for what it was: Victor's attempt to prime the pump. Whenever his reporters had even a whiff of something going on, he would press them to toss their "according to"s and "had no comment"s into a story then run with it. The ensuing intrigue or outrage would then loosen tongues and a fuller story would emerge in the coming days. As a reporter, Andrea was never quite comfortable putting her name on these glorified innuendos, but Victor was adamant. "We've got to run *something*," he'd insisted. Victor hated getting scooped by the local TV news.

Kim Roman had been a cipher to her yesterday, a name with a face she couldn't place. But Andrea remembered her after reading the article. She was young, only 22 or 23, fresh out of college and in only her first year as a teacher. Andrea knew this because she had taken her picture and talked to her for a newsletter item she'd put together on the school system's new hires.

That was three months ago, in August, when she had finally settled into the rhythm of life post-David. There was a small reception in Central's multipurpose room, a spartan space which pulled double duty as the school's gym and auditorium. They'd raised the backboards up to the ceiling and lined the hardwood with gray metal folding chairs. A podium stood dead center in front of the stage, flanked on the right by a long folding table with seating for the Board of Education. An identical table stood against the left wall where it housed plates and napkins and a sheet cake. Andrea thought the whole setup looked cheap.

Dr. Price stood at the podium and bid the new hires welcome. Then he called them up one at a time, all 50-plus of them, to shake his hand and the hands of the Board

members while Andrea snapped some pictures. She remembered Kim Roman because Kim Roman reminded her a bit of Sara, the woman David left her for. The resemblance wasn't overpowering – Kim Roman's hair was lighter and straighter and shorter, and her voice had more heft – but there was something precious and doll-like about each of them that irked Andrea to no end. At 5'11", she'd long harbored a tall girl's insecurities.

The formal part of the reception gave way to cake and mingling and Andrea began her rounds. She talked to the new teachers, made herself known, took note of their distinguishing characteristics (the new science teacher at the middle school, for instance, was almost as tall as she was and wore her hair combed severely to the left side) and, if they had anything interesting to say, wrote it down for the newsletter. Kim Roman had something interesting to say.

"My parents are both teachers, so this is kind of like the family business for me," she explained. "Growing up, I never thought I'd get into it, though. My sisters, yes, but not me. I actually changed my major three times in college before I went with education, and even then it was like 'OK, I'll get the degree, but there's no way I'm doing this.' But then I did my student teaching and I really liked it. And coming here, I just think I can really make a difference."

Despite her resemblance to Sara, Andrea found herself hating her a lot less after that. Like her, Kim Roman was also an accommodator. However, she seemed determined to make the most of that defeat. She was either admirably determined or touchingly naïve.

It took until nearly 11 a.m. the day after the slap for Dan to call her about the follow-up. At first, she wondered what had taken him so long, but within a few minutes, she knew. Victor's ploy had worked and people were talking.

"I just got off the phone with Anita Fuller, mother of Durrell Fuller," Dan explained. "According to her, Durrell was talking in class. Miss Roman told him to stop and he talked back, told her to shut up, actually. Mother says she slapped him, apologized, and left the classroom. Two other parents left me voicemails saying their kids were there when this happened. I think I'm going to need to talk to Dr. Price about this one."

"Right," Andrea replied. She was being skipped over and it stung a bit. Handling these kinds of catastrophes is what she thought she was hired to do. By keeping her out of the loop, Dr. Price effectively neutered her. "He's been in meetings all day, Dan. But I'll see if I can track him down."

"It gets better," Dan told her. "Reverend Flood called too."

Andrea twisted her lips into a frown. Hiram Flood was many things – pastor, politician, race-baiter, community leader, advocate for the homeless, misappropriator of grant funds, shameless self-promoter – and only a few of them were good. When she was at the *Progress*, "I've just been Flooded" became a popular lament for whichever reporter just got stuck dealing with him.

"Did he say what he wanted?" Andrea asked.

"No, he just left a message," Dan told her. "He's my next call, actually. But, between me and you, I can take a guess."

“Taking shots at Dr. Price again?”

“A tre-MEN-dous failure of leadership!” Dan bellowed, nailing the preacher’s familiar refrain. “That and not enough black male role models in the classroom. Same thing every time.”

“Same thing when I was there, too,” Andrea said.

“Off the record, she’s done, isn’t she?” Dan asked. “This teacher.”

“Off the record, I don’t know,” Andrea replied. “But I sure hope so.”

After she got off the phone with Dan, she went to seek out Dr. Price about arranging a sit-down. His receptionist told her he was still in a meeting in the conference room but should be done soon. Andrea walked down the narrow, blue-carpeted hallway between his office and her desk and paused outside the closed conference room door. She heard voices from within, one of which she knew was Kim Roman’s.

“What about *my* rights?” she said. “Don’t I have the right to go into my own classroom without being told to shut up? Without being called a bitch?”

Andrea walked back to her desk thinking that if Dr. Price decided to be coy with Dan later on, she would leak the news herself. Kim Roman was done.

David was a scientist. He spent his days researching ultra-lightweight materials for an aerostat manufacturer out near the Coast Guard base. Andrea had been deeply ambivalent about his job. On the one hand, she was proud of him. What he was doing could change the world. There could be a revolutionary new kind of weather balloon and she would beam at the fact that her husband had a hand in its making. But on the other hand,

she didn't pretend to understand most of it. She knew the basic principles of physics involved, but the jargon (windscreen pressure and the like) was all Greek to her. Listening to David talk shop made her feel dumb.

It wasn't until Sara came along that Andrea thought that he saw her that way. Sara was his assistant, an engineering student at State out on an internship. Andrea met her at a blimp unveiling. The airship in question – an ugly, white, phallic monstrosity – hadn't been David's doing, but it was a big deal for the company and everyone turned out to lend their support. After the executives made their speeches and hobnobbing commenced, David brought Sara over for an introduction.

At first glance, Andrea was taken with how demure the girl seemed. She was a child, really: flat and small and squeaky-voiced, a vision of geeky reservation.

"So you're the poor thing he bosses around all day," Andrea joked.

Sara giggled nervously. "I don't mind," she said. "It's been great working here. Good experience. I've learned so much."

"Don't look at me," David said. "She's a quick learner. Another week or two and she'll know more than I do."

Andrea smiled. There was something likeable about Sara. She was so harmless that Andrea couldn't possibly conceive of her as a threat, even when it became clear that David was, on some level, smitten. He talked about her frequently in the weeks that followed. "Sara really helped me out of a jam," he'd said one night over dinner. Another night, while they were watching *Gray's Anatomy*, he let it slip that she was on a full scholarship at State and made the dean's list every semester.

“Sounds like you found your soul mate,” Andrea teased.

“Maybe,” David said with a goofy smile. Andrea faux-punched him in the arm.

She saw Sara as a boon for David: someone he could talk to about the intricacies of his work, someone he could mentor and inspire. That was a role she knew she could never step into, so she didn’t object to his Sara-talk, despite the monotony of his praise. She supposed if the tables were turned, if she had a young assistant who could make sense of the jumble of education acronyms, David would be equally supportive. Besides, he came home every night, their sex life endured, and he could still be counted on for the occasional, sincere “I love you.”

It was late winter when he confessed. The ground was hard as slate and the air merciless and raw. People were catching colds left and right — the schools welcomed germs like Wal-Mart greeters beckoning new customers. It was good stewing weather, though, and a beef-and-lentil combination was on Andrea’s mind for most of the day. The plan was for her to get it started on her lunch break. Then, when they both got home from work, David would add to it. It would be a collaborative effort. They’d eat late, but they’d eat well.

Andrea held up her end, chopping carrots and onions and tossing things into a metal pot. But David came home later than expected and when he did, the look on his face told her he wouldn’t be doing any stewing.

“I still love you,” he’d explained. “I’ll always love you, Andi. It’s just that Sara and I have more in common at this point.”

They'd been sitting at the table when he broke the news and so when she reached for something to throw at him, it ended up being a half-empty container of vitamins. It bounced off his forehead, fell to the floor and rolled on the smooth tile under the table and into the wall.

"More in common?" she snarled. "Jesus Christ, David, she is a fucking child!"

Sara was 20, nearly 21. Andrea and David were both in the infancy of their 30s. Such age gaps were not insurmountable, she knew. One of her boyfriends before David had been five years her senior and age had never been an issue. What were five more years?

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just couldn't keep it from you anymore."

Andrea got up from the table, walked over to the simmering pot on the stove and helped herself to a wooden spoonful of the soon-to-be stew. It burned her tongue and made her eyes water, and for that pain she was thankful.

Dan's follow-up story in the *Progress* filled in most of the blanks. Multiple sources confirmed Anita Fuller's version of events. Durrell had been talking in class. He acted up frequently, his mother admitted, but she was working on getting the boy some discipline and self-control. The slap undid all of that. "I just don't understand how a teacher can do something like this," another parent commented. "Don't they have training?"

Dr. Price, in his customary tight-lipped fashion, went on the record to express his regret and mention that Kim Roman was no longer employed by the school system. "We

expect all of our teachers to be compassionate and dedicated to the success of each and every child,” he said. He went on to say that the slap was an isolated incident and no changes in policy were forthcoming.

As expected, Rev. Flood weighed in. The slap, he said, was a wake-up call for the need for reform in the school system. “Change is needed, starting at the top.” Andrea was a little disappointed, but mostly relieved, that he wasn’t planning on organizing some kind of demonstration.

All in all, it was a good article, one which Andrea would have been proud to have written. Kim Roman still wasn’t talking and Andrea suspected she never would. She hoped Victor had the sense to realize that and wouldn’t send Dan fishing for any more comments. She liked Dan and both admired and pitied him for sticking to a job that had pushed her away.

She hesitated calling him a friend, though, for reasons which had little to do with the required distance between reporters and sources. After David had confessed but before he left, she’d considered taking Dan on as a lover. It wasn’t that she found him especially attractive (he had good hair, but he was chubby), it was that he was a colleague and a husband and a father and Andrea was filled with the need to do something transgressive. And she could think of nothing more wrong than being pumped by Dan Becker in her own bed while her soon-to-be ex-husband was at work. She knew she could make it happen, too.

In the end, she didn’t go through with it, not because her conscience got the better of her, but because she got bored with the idea. Screwing Dan wouldn’t fix things. It was

a Band-Aid, nothing more. Instead, she drove up to Virginia Beach for the weekend without telling David and refused to discuss the trip with him when she got back. She suspected his own imagination could be crueler than she could ever be.

Andrea was thinking of another trip the day Dan's follow-up ran. It was too cold to really enjoy Virginia Beach, but there was always Raleigh or maybe even Richmond. It didn't matter where, really. Her Saturday was free and she needed to get away.

She was weighing her travel options when her phone rang. Dr. Price's extension showed up on the display and she picked up immediately.

"Reverend Flood is up front," he said. "Please see what he wants."

"All right," Andrea said. She hung up, sighed and sucked in her breath. Rev. Flood was the last person she wanted to deal with just then, but somebody had to deal with him and it wasn't going to be Dr. Price. She wasn't happy about having this chore dumped on her, but at least she wasn't being cut out of the loop again.

Andrea passed through the double doors that led to the small lobby and found Rev. Flood sitting casually in a blue-cushioned seat near a display case. He was a thick sparkplug of a man with a thin moustache and a hairline in retreat. A white handkerchief was tucked neatly into one pocket of his Navy pinstripe suit and a small silver crucifix was pinned to his lapel. He was flanked by a woman Andrea did not recognize. The woman was heavysset, middle-aged and looked thoroughly overwhelmed.

"Andrea," Rev. Flood boomed, rising to his feet when she entered. "This is Mrs. Fuller. We've come to see Dr. Price."

Andrea greeted Mrs. Fuller with the most courteous smile she could manage, then asked Rev. Flood if they had an appointment. They, of course, did not.

“What would you like to talk to him about?” Andrea asked. She felt like she was 17 again and a waitress taking orders from demanding slobs in a rundown diner. At least then she knew she only had to put up with it for the summer.

“Reconciliation,” Rev. Flood replied, stretching out each syllable for maximum effect. “I hope to get Dr. Price and Miss Roman and Mrs. Fuller together so that we can talk about what happened. So that we may learn from it. It would be a tremendous opportunity.”

Andrea nodded, then excused herself. She nearly broke into a sprint when she crossed the double doors and bolted directly for Dr. Price’s office. He frowned at her intrusion and frowned again when she explained what was going on in the lobby. She expected him to ask her to relay a firm “no” to Rev. Flood and she prepared herself for the tirade that would come when she delivered the message.

Instead, Dr. Price surprised her by clearing his throat and walking back with her to the lobby. “Perhaps I had better see to this,” was all he gave by way of explanation.

Andrea knew she could have returned to her desk as soon as they crossed the double doors. He didn’t need her there for support, just as he didn’t seem to need her for much of anything else. But she couldn’t bring herself to step away. Watching Dr. Price and Rev. Flood go head-to-head was too good a show to pass up.

“Excellent!” Rev. Flood clamored when the superintendent appeared. “Now if you’ll be so kind as to bring Miss Roman in here, we can settle this here today.”

“Miss Roman is no longer an employee of this school system,” Dr. Price told him.
“I cannot compel her to appear anywhere.”

“But you can ask her, can’t you? Yes, I know you can. You the only one here who can reach her. She hasn’t returned my calls.”

“I will not,” Dr. Price replied stiffly. “Quite frankly, this whole thing strikes me as counterproductive.”

“Oh, it does, huh?” the reverend mocked. “Let me tell you something, brother. You aren’t helping. Time’s gonna come when certain people realize that, and when they do...”

“Please,” Mrs. Fuller said, breaking her silence. “I don’t want to cause no trouble. All I want to do is ask her why she hit my boy and let her tell me herself that she’s sorry.”

“You are welcome to try contacting her on your own,” Dr. Price told her. “I’m afraid I’ve done all I can in this matter. Reverend, Mrs. Fuller, thank you for stopping by.”

And with that, he returned to his office, leaving Rev. Flood fuming and Mrs. Fuller shaking her head. Andrea stifled a grin. She was pleased not only because Rev. Flood had been shut down, but because Dr. Price did the right thing. He could have put himself in Rev. Flood’s good graces and improved his job security by reaching out to Kim Roman. He could have even passed along her cell number or e-mail address in private, something that was not legal but also not unheard of. He didn’t do either of those things though and Andrea respected him for it. Clearly, he was not an accommodator.

Nor was Kim Roman, she finally realized. She'd had no sympathy for the ex-teacher up until Rev. Flood walked in, and she still couldn't fathom hitting a child. But it occurred to Andrea that Kim Roman had never once tried to save herself. She could have given a teary-eyed mea culpa and perhaps hung onto her job. She could have played Rev. Flood's game and jumped on the reconciliation bandwagon. Yet she hadn't, as far as Andrea knew, even admitted she was wrong. There was something unsettling about her lack of guilt, but something admirable as well. It was as if dozens of hands — Dan Baker's, Rev. Flood's, Mrs. Fuller's — were reaching for a piece of her and she refused to yield even an inch of herself to any of them.

It rained over the weekend and Andrea stayed in town. A few days later – a full week after the slap – she spotted Kim Roman in a supermarket parking lot. The ex-teacher was transferring paper grocery bags into one of those late-model crossover SUVs that Andrea thought looked like very expensive toys. When Andrea saw her, her stomach tightened. She wanted to commiserate, perhaps express some admiration, but she couldn't think of a single appropriate thing to say. For all she knew, Kim Roman would give her the cold shoulder, if she remembered her at all.

Andrea nudged her shopping cart slowly toward her own car, across the aisle and about three spaces down from Kim's. She stopped, however, when she drew parallel with the SUV. She wouldn't have a chance like this again.

“Kim,” she called across the parking lot aisle. “Kim Roman.”

The former teacher put her grocery-loading on pause and shot her a “do I know you?” look.

“Andrea,” Andrea said, stepping closer so she wouldn’t have to shout. “From the central office. I just wanted to say I’m sorry about what happened.”

“Oh,” a slightly flustered Kim replied. “Well, thank you.”

“I hope you land on your feet in the next district.”

“Next district?” Kim said, then began to laugh. “Honey, I’m done teaching. I know my parents won’t like that, but they never had to work here. I can’t stand this place.”

“You and me both,” Andrea said. The tension left her stomach and she thought of asking Kim to get coffee with her. They’d exchange gripes about disrespectful students, about David, about all the takers in the world. In Kim, she would gain a friend, an ally, maybe even a mentor who could cure her of being an accommodator.

“Just between you and me?” Kim said, her voice dropping into a gossipy semi-whisper. “Your boss is a real snake.”

“Well...” Andrea began. A week ago, she might have agreed. But after watching Dr. Price stand up to Rev. Flood, she couldn’t bring herself to hate the man. Of course, Kim Roman didn’t know any of that. But Andrea was sure Kim would change her mind once she told her what her former boss had done to protect her.

“And these kids?” Kim continued. “I mean, my God! Don’t even get me started on the parents...”

Whatabout me?, Andrea thought. Am I like that too? Are we all just so terrible around here?

Andrea's admiration melted into a fiery, bubbling anger. Kim Roman was no role model. She was an ingrate and a brat and Andrea felt ashamed for having thought otherwise. Instead of having coffee and confiding in her, Andrea wanted to grab her and slap her hard across the face. "You hit a child," she wanted to scream. "How dare you look down on any of us!"

"I've got to go," she mumbled, turning her cart around.

"Bye, Angela."

Andrea didn't bother to correct her. She crossed the aisle once more in a fast walk, her fingers wrapped tightly around the cart's handlebar. When she reached her row, she swung the cart around violently and let go. Andrea watched it sail across the asphalt, wondering a moment later who or what it might have occasion to hit.

HOMEROOM

Miss Flay finished taking Wednesday morning's attendance and I was ready to roll. My lyrics were out and my Yankees cap was on. I was just about to get up in front of homeroom and drop a fresh set of rhymes when the principal came over the P.A. and cut me off.

"Teachers, students, faculty and staff, your attention please," he began. That was the way he began every announcement. The building could be on fire and we'd hear "teachers, students, faculty and staff, your attention please" before we were told which door to leave through. This time, however, even *he* sounded tired of saying it. There was a deep, heavy sigh before he continued with, "It is with great sadness that I report the loss of two of our own."

I was the only one to turn around when I heard the name "Terri Kronin," but everyone had a reaction. Pam Krueger started crying and said Terri's name. Mike Kopp whispered "Awe, shit" and looked at the floor. Miss Flay scrunched her lips together and shook her head. No one had their headphones on or their face buried in a magazine. No one.

Following a moment of silence, our principal announced that there would be a special meeting of the Student Government Association after school and that all officers and senior homeroom representatives were required to attend. That meant me.

“What’s going on, Pete?” Kopp asked from the seat behind me.

“I have no idea,” I told him. I could only guess that it had something to do with Terri. It was a guess I kept to myself, though. Everyone was so shaken and gut-punched I was afraid to even say her name.

Before she lost her life in a car wreck, Terri sat two seats behind me in homeroom. Even after I heard the news, I couldn’t think of her as *gone* gone; just not there. It was as if she could have been at home sneezing her way through a box of Puffs or out shopping for the day because fuck it, senior year was meant for cutting.

I’d been homeroom representative for all of a week when it happened. Officially, I was tasked with collecting cap-and-gown orders and distributing graduation information and other such things. We had elections the beginning of senior year, somebody put my name forward and I won in a landslide. Terri told me she’d been one of those votes.

I won the election because everyone in homeroom knew who I was and everyone knew who I was because of the rapping. I’d always been good with wordplay and at sixteen, I had a lot to say. I didn’t want to become one of those Sensitive Poet-Types though, because every Sensitive Poet-Type I’d come across had been a brooding, self-centered douche. So I parlayed everything into rapping, only it wasn’t real rapping – more like half-assed slam poetry.

Whatever it was, the kids in my homeroom ate it up. I got applause and high-fives and enjoyed the status of an extremely minor celebrity. People who saw me in the hall

would ask what I was working on next. People who heard about me from those in homeroom made their introductions by way of, “So you’re that rapping kid, right?”

The rapping started, ironically, because I hated rap. I was tired of all these bling-laden wannabe-thugs cranking out song after song about some mythical street life I was supposed to take an interest in or feel connected to. Hello, this was suburban fucking New Jersey! But that’s what my peers, predominately white and middle-class as they were, listened to, and since they didn’t listen to me, I decided, circa junior year, to join what I couldn’t beat.

My initial offerings were diss tracks. I took shots at Eminem, Jay-Z, whoever was selling (or whoever I *thought* was selling) at the time. I’d say things like, “Yeah, you the real Shady/but I still stole your lady,” or “S. Carter? Try harder/Your Life and Times ain’t got nothing on mine.” I’d usually do this with a backwards-turned baseball cap and a whole lot of hand gestures and people would laugh. They probably thought they were laughing at me because I looked and sounded ridiculous, but they were laughing at themselves too, whether they knew it or not.

After a while, I got tired of dissing rappers and moved on to riffing on other things. O.J. Simpson, the upcoming presidential election, pro wrestlers, Mike and Ike candy, whatever popped into my head. I even got around to name-dropping my audience, throwing out lines like “By the time I get out the slam, all my girls be sagging, even that Pam.” Sometimes, I fell flat and no one laughed, but I never let this stop me. If I didn’t get a good response, I’d just move onto something completely different the next time.

My one rule was that I kept it clean. That meant no cussing — neither the Seven Dirty Words nor the more benign variety. So “bitches” became “witches” and “fuck” evaporated into a pause or a “bleep” and thus I stayed on Miss Flay’s good side and was allowed to continue.

Having the same homeroom teacher two years in a row was a stroke of good luck. If I’d ended up with a real hard-ass, my rapping never would have gotten off the ground. Even Miss Flay was skeptical at first.

“I don’t know, Pete,” she said when I ran the idea by her. “I just don’t know.”

Then I showed her what I had written for what eventually became the Jay-Z rap and she chuckled. She was in her early 30s and bored-looking and childless and not that far out of the loop. Besides, it wasn’t like I’d be interrupting anything. Once attendance was taken and announcements were made, most of us spent homeroom goofing off. Miss Flay gave me a provisional OK and I made my debut the next day. I had fun with it until I lost a member of my audience. When Terri died, I went on hiatus.

They’d herded us into the cafeteria for the SGA meeting and the lingering smell of fries made me instantly hungry. It was weird being in there with most of the chairs stacked upside down on tables and the food service areas shuttered and the usual lunchtime chatter noticeably absent. It was also weird that Mrs. Carrollson was presiding. She’d been my eleventh-grade English teacher and made so many references to her local theatre group and her garden and her grandkids that I didn’t think she’d have the time or the energy for anything else.

Busy or not, Mrs. Carrollson gave me a nod of recognition and I took my seat among the other representatives. There were more than a dozen of us and most were nothing like me. They were Go-Getter Types who loaded up on extracurriculars and went rafting with their church youth groups and baked cupcakes for fundraisers. I was a skinny white kid who rapped badly.

As it turned out, I was being recruited as a messenger. We all were. Terri Kronin and Jenny Gamara were dead, Jayson Pinto – who’d been driving the car – was in the hospital with serious injuries. Their absence affected us all. And so, Mrs. Carrollson concluded, it was very, very important that if anyone needed someone to talk to, we point them in the right direction: a school counselor we’d all come to know and mock as Please Call Me Adam, because he said it so much.

Mrs. Carrollson was from Tennessee. Her “very, very” came out as “verruh, verruh.” That might have cracked me up if I hadn’t had all of junior year to get used to it. Even after all that verbiage on loss and grief, I still might have laughed. The gravity of the situation hadn’t hit me yet. It felt like TV. Someone died and this is what you do when someone dies.

That all changed with the card though. Mrs. Carrollson asked me to stick around after the meeting and handed me a yellow envelope. Underneath the envelope was a white greeting card, not a Hallmark, but an off-brand. There was a single silver flower on the cover. Above it, “Miss You” had been printed in a bold, elegant script. The inside of the card was completely blank.

“I think it would be a nice thing for Terri’s parents if you could get everyone in your homeroom to sign,” Mrs. Carrollson explained.

I gulped. By signing a card for Terri, we were effectively writing her out of existence. Her name would be stricken from the cap-and-gown order checklist. There would be one less graduation information handout to pass out in homeroom. Pam would probably move up a seat and that chair in the back of my row would be filled by a ghost. All that would be left of Terri would be the memories and things like this stupid card, which, suddenly wasn’t so stupid anymore.

The card left me with questions, grave questions and doubts. What if someone was absent? What if we ran out of space for signatures? What if someone didn’t want to sign because they had issues with letting go or found the card a totally inadequate gesture to express how they felt? What in God’s name do I do then? I was anxious to ask Mrs. Carrollson, but her back was turned and she had moved on giving another card to some poor bastard in Jenny’s homeroom.

Walking home with that card in my backpack made me feel like I was driving one of those big tanker trucks with the hazmat decals on the back. It was an errand of delicacy and import that I, with my nonsense rhymes, couldn’t help but feel ill-suited for. That I could make people laugh no longer seemed to matter, just like my problems – college application anxiety, my sick grandma, failed attempts to lose my virginity, Rick Iancone cracking on me in gym class – didn’t matter either. How could they matter? Terri was fucking dead.

About eight months before she lost her life, I had asked Terri out on a date. It was a dare from Mike Kopp; a joke; a stupid, pointless thing that came out of us talking at our lockers between classes one day. He didn't think I had it in me to ask a girl out, so I told him I'd ask out any decent-looking single girl of his choosing. He chose Terri.

Unfortunately, that put me in a bind, because Terri and I weren't even really friends. We'd say "hey" if we saw each other in the hallway and she'd occasionally give me feedback on my rhymes, but that was about it. That isn't to say that she wasn't good-looking and I wouldn't have dated her in a cocaine heartbeat, but rather that I knew I stood no chance.

Instead of backing out, however, I spent some time that afternoon – time which should have been spent on homework – considering my approach. Sincere was out. I couldn't very well walk up to her and say "Hey, would you like to go out some time?" She'd laugh and Kopp would laugh and I'd feel like shit. No, if I was going to get laughed at, it would be on my terms.

The next day in homeroom, I carried my chair from my desk to Terri's and planted it in the aisle to her left. I sat in it backwards, arms draped over the hard plastic chair back, legs jutting out in front of me, head cocked, a caricature of someone trying too hard to look cool.

"Ladies," I said to her and Pam.

They exchanged confused glances and chuckled and I felt my nerve starting to fade.

"Pete," Pam said at last. "What's up?"

I hesitated. One row in front of us, Kopp was whispering something to Jimmy Lashley and pointing in our direction. I got an ant-under-the-magnifying-glass feeling and started to bristle. Maybe clowning wasn't such a good idea here. Maybe I gave everyone enough of that in my raps. Maybe I gave them *too* much, even, and now they'd stopped seeing me as anything else.

If I'd waited a moment longer, I might have called it off, said forget it, told Kopp he was a fucking asshole for putting me up to this. But then Terri called my name and I went on autopilot.

"So Terri," I said with an exaggeratedly suggestive nod. "I was wondering if I could get your number. You're a hottie and I'd like to take you out some time."

Terri's eyes got anime-big, her mouth hung open and her brows practically leapt off her face. Then she got that it was a joke and she started to laugh and I started laughing too, but in that moment before the laughter, I felt all kinds of broken.

"I don't think so," she said at last. "Sorry, Pete." Then, louder, "Nice try, Mike!"

"Well," I said with mock-offense. "I can tell when I'm not wanted."

I made a show of picking up my chair and carrying it back to my desk. When I sat back down, Kopp tapped me on the shoulder. He was red in the face from laughing.

"Dude," he said. "You need to work on your approach."

I turned back around without answering him and shook my head. There were no more raps that week and I started thinking of other things I could be doing, like starting a novel or giving more thought to my college apps. In the meantime, my homeroom crew all but ignored me. I got "Hey Pete" and some inquiries about my next set of rhymes and

that was about it. Being invisible again bummed me out and I was back to rapping less than ten days later.

Somehow, I made it back to homeroom with the card intact. I'd tucked it into a zippered compartment in my backpack that I never used so it wouldn't be crushed or bent. I even planned on buying lunch that day to thwart the infinitesimally small chance my usual soda can would burst and leak over everything. I was jittery all throughout the first few minutes of homeroom and by the time Miss Flay finally yielded the floor for my announcement, I felt like I had an acute case of radiation poisoning. That card was emotionally toxic and I wanted it gone.

I got up from my desk, walked a few steps to the front of the room, and turned around to face the sixteen or so bored, tired, anxious, angsty faces in my homeroom. I was usually pretty comfortable in this spot, because when it came to rapping, there were no expectations. I didn't have to be up there if I didn't want to be and I didn't have to be any good. But now, with the card, I *had* to come through.

I cleared my throat and tried to channel Mrs. Carrollson's effortless calm, but nothing came of it. The overhead lights were making me sweat and I felt like someone had jacked the thermostat up a good ten degrees.

"You going to drop some rhymes, Pete?" Kopp asked.

I shook my head and held up the card. "For Terri," I stammered. I passed it to Cindy Jaworski in the first chair by the door and quickly returned to my seat. By the time the card reached me, it was half-filled with variations of "I'll miss you" and "You were

the best.” I was at a complete loss for what my contribution would be. What do you say to a dead girl you barely knew without sounding like a total fraud?

I held that card there longer than I should have, my pen tapping against the unmarked surface, my words failing me completely. Ultimately, I went with “I’m sorry you’re gone,” which was the only true thing I could think of. It also sounded incredibly cold, as in “I didn’t really know you, but I’m sorry you had to die.” When I handed the card off to Kopp, I felt like I was passing him a snotted-up tissue to dispose of.

As soon as the last signature was on the card, I got a hall pass from Miss Flay and ran it down to the main office post-haste. I didn’t want to wait until after school or even between classes. I wanted that sucker gone ASAP. Maybe I was being ridiculous and the Kronins would actually be touched by everyone’s signatures and comments. But if I was them and I just lost a daughter and I felt like my whole world had been ripped up, then what fucking difference would a card make?

The thing about Terri is that she was long. Long legs, long face, long blonde hair. If her nose was long too, she might have looked a bit like a horse, but it wasn’t, so she didn’t. The locker-room consensus was that she was hot, but, like Uma Thurman, nobody could really figure out why she was hot. She had a nothing chest and her eyes didn’t draw you in. When the guys in gym class started rattling off names of girls they would do, Terri Kronin never came up first.

This – and the sound of her laugh and the fact that she chewed Bubble Yum gum – was as much as I really got to know about her. I wished I could say I knew she was

good with children and probably would have made a decent elementary school teacher; that she slept on the left side of her bed facing the wall and never the right; that one of the many bracelets she wore was given to her by a proto-boyfriend named John who moved away when she was 12 and later died of leukemia; that she had a younger brother; that she dug the color violet; that she had a love-hate relationship with Blink 182; that she liked swimming but feared drowning; that she thought I was a bit goofy, but an OK guy otherwise.

But I didn't know any of this, at least not while she was alive. That's what made her death so hard for me to process. I couldn't grieve for what I didn't know and I couldn't ignore what was right fucking *there*. I couldn't place myself in that car on that night, either, because Terri wasn't me. All I could do was wonder what it would be like if it had been someone close to me instead of her.

A couple of days after the wreck and the announcement and the card and the funeral, Pam had a mini-meltdown in the hallway by her locker after fifth period. I arrived at my locker nearby just in time to catch the tail end of her tirade. Short, quiet, brown-eyed Pam had given way to an angry, motor mouthed, vindictive version of herself and another girl – Gwen or Grace or something – was trying in vain to calm her down.

“It's fucking bullshit what they're saying about Jay,” Pam told her. “I know him and he is NOT like that. And even if he did, it's because someone put pressure on him. Probably Morgan. Fucking Morgan, that fucking bitch! This is all her fault. Because if

she hadn't said that thing to me at the mall, I probably would have gone to her stupid party and looked out for Terri and Jenny and they'd still be alive. Ugh!"

She beat a hasty retreat to parts unknown and when I saw her again at the end of the day, she seemed fine.

"What was that all about?" I asked Kopp, who'd been there to see the whole thing.

"You don't want to know, Pete," he told me.

But of course I did, so I asked around and here is what I learned. Terri and Jenny and Pinto had been at this girl Morgan's birthday party Tuesday night. Rumors were flying that the girls might have been drinking, that Pinto might have been drinking as well, or at least, driving recklessly and that Pinto was about to be charged with all kinds of shit. A friend of Kopp's had been to the hospital to see Pinto and reported back that the Jayster felt terrible, which, I guess, is the only way you can feel if two of your friends are dead and you may never walk normally again.

All this got me thinking that maybe Terri had a hand in her own death, that she put herself in harm's way by getting in that car and the wreck was just desserts for her stupidity. It was a terrible thought, I know, but I just couldn't shake it. That would make the card and the memorial plaque they were already taking donations for even more bogus, not because they were inadequate, but because they were unearned.

"Hey, Kopp," I said during one of our locker-side chats. I wanted to share this, to get some kind of validation, but I knew within a second or two that he wouldn't understand and I'd just end up sounding like an asshole.

“What?” Kopp asked.

“Forget it.”

I also didn't tell Kopp my theory of how everything happened, which was that Terri and Jenny and Jay got to Morgan's house and just lost track of each other. It wouldn't have been hard to do – Morgan's parents are loaded and their place is huge. It's so big, in fact, that no responsible adult would have been able to keep track of every guest, which was bad news in case anyone decided to sneak in booze. Jay could have gone off with his soccer teammates and the girls could have stuck with their friends and neither would have known what the other party was up to.

The other thing is the car. Jay had been driving this second-hand Maxima for less than a month and he was still getting the hang of it. He nearly rear-ended someone in the parking lot on the first day of school. So you had Jay – maybe impaired, maybe not – behind the wheel of a car he couldn't really handle in the first place, probably going faster than he should to get Terri and Jenny home on time so their parents didn't flip out, only he ended up plowing the Maxima into a pillar holding up the Route 22 overpass instead.

That was how I saw it, but I kept it to myself. I wasn't there for the wreck, for any of it, actually. What the hell did I know?

I decided to write something for Terri after I'd been unable to continue with my usual shtick. It just didn't seem appropriate to drop lines like “You got a rep as a play-

hater like Crowe got gold for *Gladiator*” while that seat in the back of homeroom remained haunted and empty. If things were ever going to get back to normal, tribute (and a real tribute, not some stupid card) would have to be paid.

Initially, I didn’t think this would be a problem. I was in AP English, and, as far as I knew, I could write OK. But I’d been doing nonsense rhymes for so long that it took me about five tries to get out of that mode. On my first attempt, I ended up with “Terri, Terri, quite contrary” without even thinking about it. Clearly, that wouldn’t do.

Even when I finally got around to being serious, I struggled. I gave up counting the number of false starts after 10. If I were writing things out by hand instead of on a computer, I would have killed half a notebook. Despite my best efforts, everything I tried came out sounding funny, even the stuff which was supposed to be sincere. I’d write something like “Your absence is an x-marked box in the tally of our souls” and crack up, because what the fuck did that even mean? In the end, when I finally managed to cobble together a dozen or so lines of verse, I stopped not because I was satisfied, but because I was too frustrated to go on.

Still, I had to read it. There would be no peace for me if I didn’t. So the next day in homeroom, following attendance and morning announcements, I took my spot in the front of the room. I was without my backwards-turned baseball cap and my hands were in front of me, clutching a printed page.

I cleared my throat. Someone said, “Yo, Pete’s gonna rhyme.” I thought about Terri again and forgave her. We were all young and we were all pretty stupid.

“This is for Terri,” I began.

From the back of the room, Pam glared at me with alarm. If anyone got what I was trying to do, I hoped it would be her.

I raised the paper toward my face and started to read. That was a first for me, reading. Usually, I performed. But there was no laughter, no reaction, nothing for me to go on. I didn't even look up from the page the whole time. I don't remember exactly what I wrote, because I shredded the paper not long afterwards, but I think it went something like this:

*I dedicate this one to Terri Kronin
Her spark's gone out, her life's been stolen
We're all going to miss her here in homeroom
Her passing was shameful, tragic, verboten.*

*Terri, you were two seats behind me but #1 in my mind
Those blonde locks were comely and your eyes were real kind
I'd give anything to put this past month on rewind
If your life was sweet fruit, your death is hard rind*

*Your desk now sits empty, lonely and bleak
Pam didn't move up – she's in the back as I speak
We'll be thinking about you every day of the week:
That crazy-cool laugh and your grape BubbleYum reek*

*Terri, if I could've said anything besides "Don't get in that car."
It would be that you were way above par
Ordinary people can be found near or far
But you, girl, completely raised the bar*

Rest in peace

When I was finished, I had a room full of uncomprehending stares to contend with. If this was a movie, one person would start clapping slowly, then another, then I'd have a whole room full of applause. But that didn't happen. What did happen was I turned a thousand shades of red and lingered in front of that room like a piece of sun-

kissed roadkill until Miss Flay, merciful and terse and none too comfortable herself, said, “Thank you for that, Pete” and I returned to my seat.

“Pete,” Kopp asked, his meaty hand tapping my shoulder for the kajillionth time that year. “What the hell was that?”

“What?” I replied, my voice strained to the point of cracking. “It’s a poem.”

He gave me a look like I’d lost my mind and I turned back around and we didn’t say anything to each other the rest of the day, not even at the lockers. That was still better than I got from Pam, who wouldn’t even look at me. She carried her friend’s death on her small, stooping shoulders and I noticed for the first time a picture of her and Terri taped to the inside of her locker. They were standing in front of an empty lane in a bowling alley, smiling in that way that just couldn’t be faked.

DANNYDOGS

The restaurant wasn't quite a diner, but it was done up that way, retro style, a lot of red and white and black. White walls, white-and-black checkered tile on the floor, black metal chairs with thin red cushions, black tabletops, a white exterior with a big red-lettered sign hanging over the entrance. I didn't want to be there to begin with and all that red and white and black made me want to leave even more.

The old man and his wife were sitting opposite from us at the table nearest to the counter, hand clasped in wrinkled hand.

"We've had this place going on thirteen years now," he said.

"Fourteen," said the wife.

"Bought it from a farmer out in Shiloh. Him and his made just 'bout everything they sold."

"They had wonderful pies," the wife added.

I nodded, even though I'd heard this all before. Stifling a yawn, I stole a glance at my watch and another at Ruth beside me. She'd heard this story too the last time we were in here, but she sat at rapt attention.

"I'd just retired, but I wasn't done working," the old man said. "I take after my daddy like that. Man worked until he was 87 years old. Well, I figured this'd about carry me through. And it done near did too, though I'd have liked another year or two more."

“He’s got the arthritis,” the wife explained.

“And our daughter’s got them grandkids to be looking after now. Can’t come up here helping us out all the time like she used to.”

The mention of children made Ruth’s eyes flicker and brought a tightness to my chest. I listened to the hum of the refrigerator and noted the places on the wall where the paint was beginning to peel and fade. It was touch-up work mostly, around the doorjambs, but I knew it was only the start. Would the building be up to code? Were there problems with mice or insects? Who knew how much of the equipment was worth a damn and how much was destined for scrap?

“I think it’s lovely,” Ruth said. “Don’t you, Roy?”

And with that, I knew that we’d take it.

Buying the restaurant was Ruth’s idea, but I was an accomplice well before the fact. A few months back, before Danny died, we’d gone across the causeway to do some shopping. We were nearly back home when Ruth told me she’d forgotten to defrost something for dinner. Neither one of us felt like sitting through a long meal, so we stopped at the restaurant, which I’d passed many times before but had never entered. I figured it would at least be good for a cheap, quick meal.

As we walked toward the door, Ruth’s pointing finger fell on a sign in the window. COME TRY OUR ALL-BEEF HOT DOGS.

“I wonder if Danny knows about this place,” she said.

Our son had been a hot dog fiend from the minute he was able to chew. He gobbled them down with vigor and not a meal with them would pass without Ruth or I telling him to slow down before he choked. As he grew older, he began to experiment with toppings. Salad dressings, soy sauce, crumbled potato chips – there was always something else in the works. It wasn't uncommon to find him roaming the refrigerator on a Saturday afternoon working on his latest creation. And while I shook my head at these displays, sometimes confused and sometimes exasperated, I accepted them as Danny being Danny.

The restaurant was practically empty when we walked in: just the old man and his wife and a black fella at a corner table who was finishing up as we entered. We took the sign up on its offer and tried the dogs. They were good, I thought, but nothing special.

While we were eating, the old man wandered over from behind the counter and struck up a conversation. That was when we heard about the farmer from Shiloh and his children and nieces and nephews who all looked alike and were too many to count; about the old man and his wife and their daughter and her boyfriends (and later, husband) all working in tandem, a regular family assembly line; about feeding the families of others and watching with whimsy the smiling, ketchup-stained faces of little boys and girls.

“Be a shame to give this up,” the old man said. “But I reckon I might have to soon.”

By the time we left, we'd resolved to tell Danny about the place or at least ask him if he'd been there. But when we got home, there were clothes to put away and phone calls to return and we never said a thing.

The loan came through and we were in business. I was right about the paint needing touch-up work and wrong, thankfully, about everything else. The grill worked fine, the fridge was good and cold. If there were mice, they were doing a damn good job of hiding. It wasn't heaven, but it wasn't the hell I'd imagined either.

Of course, I didn't care for the color scheme, all that red and black and white, but we weren't in any position to change that. The one change we did make right away was to replace the Swifty's sign out front, that big red monstrosity over the entrance. Down it came and up went a smaller, simpler, replacement: DannyDogs.

I still had my doubts, still had plenty of them, but Ruth was happier than she'd been in months and I was able to piggyback onto her enthusiasm. We'd agreed that we'd give this a try for at least six months. If it worked, we'd stick with it. If it didn't, we'd turn it over to a hungry-eyed realtor we knew and walk away.

Our first day open, we hung a big banner in the front window. It read GRAND OPENING in clear, bold letters and FREE FRIES below that. With that kind of offer, I figured the hungry and the frugal and the simply curious would come out of the woodwork, but no one was there to greet us when I unlocked the door at 11 a.m.

"Why aren't they coming, Roy?" Ruth asked me impatiently a good 10 minutes later. "We're on a highway for gosh sakes."

I told her that it was easy to drive on by this place without really noticing it. I reminded her that each of us had done that plenty of times. Besides, if little old 158 was a "highway," then that made me a master chef.

“Maybe we ought to do something to attract their attention,” Ruth said.

“Well, what do you want me to do?” I asked. “Stand out front and flap my arms?”

“No, Roy,” she said. “Although...”

“What?” I asked.

“It’s silly.”

“What is it, Ruth?”

“I was wondering where we might get one of them giant hot dog costumes.”

Before I could tell her she was right about that being silly, the door chime sounded and our first customer walked in: a young fella in an Embarq shirt. He lingered in the doorway while his hesitant blue eyes scanned for other patrons.

“Y’all open?” he asked.

“We most certainly are!” Ruth said.

“Have a look,” I told him, handing him one of the paper menus we had printed up. It listed prices for our burgers and drinks and fries as well as descriptions for some 30-odd different hot dogs. There were Cheddar Dogs and Chili Dogs and Slaw Dogs, Yankee Dogs (mustard, ketchup, relish) and Chicago Dogs (relish, tomato and celery salt), the Crunchy Double Ranch (crumbled ranch chips and ranch dressing) and the East Meets West (sauerkraut and soy). Ruth and I had spent hours brainstorming the menu, trying to remember all the crazy combinations of toppings Danny put together. Each one we thought of seemed to have a story to go along with it and after a while, it became sort of like looking through a photo album.

“Good lord,” the young man said. “That’s a lot of hot dogs.”

“Take your pick,” I told him. “And don’t forget your get free fries.”

I left the front to man the grill while Ruth stayed on the register. I heard the sound of money changing hands and a moment later, Ruth was handing me my first order ticket. The young man had kept it simple: a dog with ketchup and mustard and a Coke. It didn’t take me but a few minutes to cook and dress the dog and set it out, with the fries and the drink on a red (of course) hard plastic tray. I passed the tray to Ruth, who in turn passed it to our customer.

“How is it?” I asked, walking back to the front.

The customer nodded and paused to lick the mustard from his fingers.

“Pretty good,” he said.

“You come back to see us now,” Ruth told him.

“Oh, I will,” he said and I felt Ruth’s hand in mind just then, warm and shaky and barely capable of being contained.

I wasn’t there when it happened, when Danny died. I was in my office, struggling to wrap my head around Steve Sanders’ poorly kept financial records. Ruth never lets me forget this fact. Even when she doesn’t come out and say it, it’s there. It lingers. It’s in every “you wouldn’t understand” or “don’t tell *me* how I should be feeling” or simply, “damnit, Roy.” I wasn’t there, but she was, at home, in the kitchen, washing the dishes from breakfast when it happened.

“It was that goddamn dog across the street,” Ruth told me later. “Parading herself across the Harkers’ front lawn like some kind of whore.”

I knew the dog she was talking about. It was about medium size with long white fur. I didn't know the breed or the name. Whatever she was, she was driving Rocket, our hound pup, crazy. That morning, he'd been half-standing with his paws pressed against the screen door, barking up a storm.

"I told him to knock it off, but he don't pay me no mind," Ruth said.

Danny was out on one of his morning runs. They'd become a daily ritual since he set his sights on making the track team as a junior in the fall. Ruth caught a glance of him coming up the walk from the kitchen window, gray shirt drenched in sweat, headphones resting on his neck like a stethoscope. Before she could tell him to watch out for Rocket, he had the door open and the dog, true to its name, took off.

"Aw, shit," Danny said. He did an about face and began to chase after the pup. He sprinted down the walkway and practically dove into the street, moving with speed and grace that would have served him well on the track team if he'd made it.

"Danny," Ruth called from the kitchen window. "You be care—"

The green Volvo's screeching brakes cut her off and the sound that followed, a wet, crunchy thud, took the breath right out of her. Ruth's paralysis was brief though, because pretty soon she was calling his name as she ran to the street, as the green Volvo woman apologized profusely and tried to explain, as the neighbors gathered 'round the fallen boy Ruth tried so desperately to shake and plead awake, as the ambulance came and the EMTs ("Ma'am, stand back please. You have to stand back.") did their futile best.

Ruth was still shouting his name when I showed up. A neighbor called and told me Danny had been hit by a car and I rushed home with the fear of God stuck in me like a jagged arrow. I arrived to find my wife shaking and screaming and my son being stretchered into an ambulance.

“Danny,” Ruth cried amid the sobs. Her voice was strained and she wore a mask of mucus and tears. “Danny!”

“Oh Jesus,” I said. I felt light in the head and light in the knees and heavy everywhere else. I wretched like I was going to throw up that morning’s breakfast and when I didn’t, I started crying and calling our son’s name too.

Danny. Danny. Danny. And many Dannys more.

It was getting closer to the end of the summer and business was starting to pick up. I continued to man the grill, sleeves rolled up, sweat pooling on my pits and brow, wondering just what the hell I was doing. I had no great love for accounting, but it was a respectable job, an office job, not anything like this. The dogs needed constant attention and I risked a scalding every time I plucked a load of fries from the hot oil. There were the days when those grilled meat smells nearly got to me and order tickets kept piling up and piling up until Ruth would ask, “How we coming, Roy?” and I couldn’t help but hate her just a little.

But by the end of one of those days, Ruth and I were sipping sodas, about to close up, and I noticed how happy she looked.

“You really like this,” I said, sounding more surprised than I’d intended.

“It keeps me busy,” she replied. “How ‘bout you?”

“Well, to tell you the truth...”

“Aw, Roy,” she said, patting my bare arm. “Honey, I know this isn’t you.”

It wasn’t me, but what could I do? I couldn’t leave her to run this thing by herself and my accounting business – a small rented office I shared with one other CPA – was getting along fine without me. It wasn’t like we were in the thick of tax season, after all.

“What if we hired someone?” she suggested.

“It’d have to be part-time,” I said. “We’re doing good, but we aren’t doing that good.”

“I know,” she replied. “I was thinking someone to work afternoons. Maybe from the high school.”

“Fine by me,” I said. I didn’t want to let on how much I’d appreciate the help. A man who couldn’t keep up with turning hotdogs had little to recommend himself by.

A NOW HIRING sign went up in the window the next day and by the middle of next week, we had our first employee, a heavysset black girl named Sharonda. She was soft-spoken but seemed dependable. There was no sighing or bellyaching when I told her what her job would be and what we could afford to pay her, just a simple “Yes, sir.” Neither Ruth nor I could bring ourselves to ask her if she had known Danny.

There was the grief and then there was the aftershock. The grief came at the hospital, at the wake, at the funeral. It came from black-clad mourners telling us how

sorry they were, from cards and flowers and fruit baskets, from adoring comments posted by his friends on his Myspace page. That was the grief.

The aftershock was different for each of us. For me, it was sitting in the car some mornings before work, engine idling, missing the hell out of him and wondering what kind of God would take a son. Even old Abraham got to keep his in the end.

For Ruth, the aftershock was silence. She drowned the whole house in her quiet some evenings, just sitting and staring and thinking. Whenever I tried to ask, I was met with a, “Please, Roy, just leave me be.” It could have been worse: she didn’t turn to drink or join a cult or plant dozens of trees or start hoarding cats. Still, she wasn’t talking much and I didn’t like it. It wasn’t good for either of us.

It was on one of those quiet nights, after a long time sitting and thinking, that she mentioned the restaurant. I’d been half-heartedly reading a magazine and wondered, for a moment, if I’d heard her right.

“The place on 158,” she said. “Past the high school?”

“What about it?” I asked.

“Well, that time we were there, the owner seemed like he was looking to sell,” she said. “I think it would be good for us. I think Danny would have liked it.”

I put down my magazine and looked at Ruth and sighed. In 20-plus years of marriage, I had a good feel for when my wife was joking and she wasn’t joking then.

“Ruth, that’s...” I began, quickly cutting myself off. It was crazy all right, but what good would it do to tell her that? Instead, I told her I’d think on it.

So I thought on it and the more I thought on it, the more I began to see the upside. I wouldn't have to commute over the causeway and if anything else happened, at least we'd be together. I still had my doubts, but after a while it stopped seeming like the craziest damn thing I'd ever heard and I was willing to give it a try. Especially, I thought, if it made Ruth happy.

"Hell of a place you've got here, bud."

He was a regular and like a lot of our regulars, he was a working man; a bulky, mulletted fella dressed in Dickies and a repairman's shirt. PHIL was stitched in red (what else) script above one pocket and he drove a white van. Those colors made him seem like he was destined for the place. It didn't hurt that he gobbled down hot dogs quicker than anyone I'd seen since Danny.

"Sure do appreciate it," I told him.

People like Phil kept me focused. As long as I was fixing him his lunch, I wasn't thinking about the office I could have been sitting in, the four years of college and twenty-odd years I'd spend in business just so I could turn around and make hot dogs. There was serenity in it, in feeding people like Phil. I cooked and they ate and as long as they paid and were happy, that's all I had to worry about.

By early autumn, I had everything down to a science. I knew exactly when to turn the dogs, how much mustard would last us how many days, who best to get our napkins from and so on. Word began to spread about our 30-odd kinds of dogs and business

picked up, especially during the lunch hour. There was even a story on us on the business page of the *Advance*.

Sharonda turned out to be a great investment. She was a quick learner and apologetic after every mishap, no matter how small the mistake.

“I’m so sorry,” she would say after a missed order or a spilled drink, her eyes glued to the floor until I told her it was all right. It took her a while to get over her shyness, but when she did, she ended up contributing a few new items to the menu. One of them, a variation on a BBQ dog, did so well that we had it on special for two weeks.

Of course, running the place wasn’t all gravy. I was always tired by the end of the day and we weren’t making a lot of money. Still, I felt comfortable enough to tell myself – and anyone else who asked – that we were doing OK.

But one Saturday, after the trees shed their leaves and the temperature dipped to the low 60s, Ruth and I were both out front killing time when a family of three came in for a late lunch. It was a man, a woman and a boy who couldn’t have been any older than 7.

“What would you like, honey?” the woman asked.

“A hot dog!” the kid said. “With lots of stuff on it.”

“He sure loves them hot dogs,” the man explained.

I nodded and gave Ruth a little nudge. But instead of saying something to the couple or to me, she hurriedly excused herself. After quickly taking the order, I went to the back to find out what had happened. Ruth was standing over the sink, dabbing her eyes with a tissue.

“He reminds me so much of Danny at that age,” she said.

“They don’t even look alike,” I told her. They didn’t. Danny had dark hair, that boy was a blonde.

“Oh Roy, that wasn’t what I meant.”

“I don’t understand,” I said. “I thought this was helping.”

“Nevermind,” she said. “Just nevermind.”

We decided, after that, that it would be a good idea to switch places for a little while. She’d work the grill and I’d man the front. While I’d grown used to everything in the back, the change wasn’t anything I couldn’t handle. Working a register, taking orders, relaying food from back to front – it was all really simple. Besides, I thought the switch would make things easier for my wife.

Yet as October passed into November, it became clear the glow Ruth had about her when we bought the place was gone for good. She was short with Sharonda, burned the dogs, undercooked the burgers and fretted constantly. If I tried to help, I was smothering her and if I didn’t try to help, I was ignoring her.

“This isn’t working,” she said around closing time two weeks before Thanksgiving. “I can’t do this anymore, Roy, I just can’t.”

“Sure you can,” I said. “We can make it work. You just need a little break is all.”

“I see him,” she said. “In every dog I make. I see him at the fridge, his tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth like it did when he was concentrating on something real hard. Don’t you see him, Roy?”

I shook my head. I saw Danny plenty when we were planning the menu those early days, but now he'd begun to fade. He was a memory now, not something living among us. Those hot dogs were just meat as far as I was concerned.

"Of course you don't," Ruth said, leaving me for the door. "You weren't there."

"Damnit, Ruth," I called after her. "That's not fair!"

She left a few days after Thanksgiving. She was going to her sister's, she told me, to rest and think things over. She said it wasn't me, wasn't me at all, but the situation. The situation. As if you could separate me from that.

The restaurant stayed closed the first few days after she was gone. I couldn't run the lunch shift single-handed and I had some thinking of my own to do. I thought about Danny and the kind of life he would have had if he made it. There was no draft and no 'Nam for him to die fighting in. Medicines could cure just about anything these days. His legacy should have been a wife and kids and grandchildren, a big old house somewhere and track medals and a name we could all be proud of. Instead, it was hot dogs with salsa or pineapple or chickpeas on them. It just wasn't fair.

Ruth wasn't fair either. She hadn't been fair to me in a long time. It wasn't my fault I was at work when Danny died, just as it wasn't her fault she wasn't able to do a thing about it. It happened when no one was expecting it. I didn't have to be there in order to hurt. I hurt plenty in my own way.

And if being there at the end was so much worse, why in God's name would Ruth wish that pain on me? The woman I'd been married to for nearly a quarter-century was

suddenly a total mystery. She told me again and again that I wouldn't understand, but when I asked her to explain, she said nothing. My son was gone and my wife was going and that was more than I could take.

Finally, after being closed for nearly a week, I opened the restaurant back up on a Monday. I didn't really want to, but I didn't know what else to do. Moping around the house was getting me nowhere. And at 46, I wasn't about to take up drinking and wild ways. It seemed better to work and keep myself occupied and hope and pray it'd do me some good.

I stayed closed through the lunch shift, losing some business in the process, but opened in time to catch travelers looking for a quick bite to eat on their way home from work. There were very few of them on that day and I spent plenty of time completely alone. Standing behind the register, I looked idly out at the highway and kicked myself for stopping at the goddamn place all those months ago.

The door chime roused me and Phil walked in. He was in DannyDogs so much I wondered what kind of repairing he actually got done. I was fixing to ask him, but he looked like he was in a rush, so I kept my mouth shut and took his order.

"Heya, bud," he said. "Lemme get a coupla dogs, fries and a Coke."

"What kind and how many?" I asked. I tried to pass him a paper menu, but he waved it away.

"Two with mustard and ketchup'll be fine," he said.

I nodded and plodded my way to the back, where I grilled and dressed the dogs and again risked the wrath of the deep fryer. Phil got to work almost as soon as I set

everything down in front of him. He wolfed down one dog like he'd been starving and was about midway through his second when he began to choke. I heard the "ack, ack" sounds and watched him put his hands to his throat.

"You OK there, fella?" I asked.

He continued to "ack, ack" and I was about to give him a big clap on the back, but I didn't. I couldn't. I had to know what it had been like for my neighbors. What it had been like for Ruth. Had to put myself there, even if it made my wrists shake and my insides groan, even if it brought a high color to my face and hooked my heart like a trophy striped bass, even if it made me bite my lip so hard I nearly drew blood. I knew it was wrong, but damn it to hell, I had to see.

Instead of helping, what I did was watch. I watched as the "acks" became more desperate and his eyes rolled back and he fell off the chair and spilled onto that stupid checkered floor like some kind of overturned tanker. Watched and thought of Ruth at that kitchen window, replacing the "ack hlech hla" with sound of failing brakes. Watched and tried to understand what I was looking at.

Only when he stopped twitching did I finally get on the phone and call 9-1-1. Told the operator I'd been in the back and when I came out front, he was already on the floor. Told her he wasn't moving and no, I couldn't feel a pulse. Told her yes, I'd wait until help arrived. Didn't tell her, didn't tell anyone, that I was *there*.

BULLRUNNER

The Zebra was two-thirds gone and it was clear to Hank that Tavion Franks was setting himself up as the new power. The organization's remaining kingpin, Leander Lovell "LeLo" Timpkins, ran a fleet of limos from a downtown lot — one of those places with a rolling chain link fence and a single-story building with fading paint. The sign by the building said "Double L Luxury Rentals," but it might as well have said "drug front." And yet Hank couldn't help but admire the stretch Continentals and sleek black Navigators as he limped his way across the lot.

From the doorway of the building, Hank watched LeLo go on a tirade. At six-foot-five, LeLo towered over both the service counter and the flustered young subordinate who stood before him. LeLo's hands were filled with sheets of pink paper, which he waved angrily at the employee, asking "Do you know what this is?" over and over again. It amused Hank for a moment, but he brought a stop to it by clearing his throat.

"We'll continue this later," LeLo said, shooing the browbeaten employee back onto the lot.

LeLo went from hot to cold in a hurry. He sized Hank up with hard, probing eyes, as if Hank was a door that would open if he stared in just the right place. Every muscle in

LeLo's face seemed tight and frantic, aching to unleash a ferocious anxiety, though he stood very still and made no sudden movements. Hank thought it was the face of a man who'd seen a ghost, which wasn't too far from the truth. Ever since LeLo's brother's trial two years ago, Hank had stopped by the lot sporadically to leave messages or unsuccessfully pump LeLo for information. He never showed a warrant, came with backup or kept on coming around. He said his piece and then he was gone.

"Man, what you want?" LeLo asked.

"Need a word," Hank said.

"Y'all the second po-lice up in here today. This getting to be harassment."

Hank offered a sympathetic shrug. "News to me."

LeLo snatched a business card tacked to corkboard behind him and pressed it into Hank's hand. The card came courtesy of Det. Glenn Taylor, Homicide. Hank puzzled over the name. He didn't know Taylor.

"What'd he want?" Hank asked.

"He come here and drop the card," LeLo said. "No warrant, no nothing. Man just wanted to let me know he was on me."

"I wouldn't worry too much about Taylor."

LeLo cracked a sly grin. "Yeah? You gonna take care of him if I pay you? That how you do?"

Hank shook his head. "You got me all wrong, LeLo," he said. "But I will take care of him for you. I'll find out what he's got on you and see if I can't get him to back off."

LeLo scratched at the fuzzy dark hair under his narrow chin. The eyes continued to probe, working former Hank's face like he'd work a piece of gum between his teeth.

"Yeah?" LeLo finally asked. "What I got to do for all that?"

"Tavion Franks," Hank said.

The eyes flickered. It was a tell, a slight one, but Hank saw it and it made him glow inside.

"Don't believe I know the name," LeLo said.

"Sure you don't. What I hear, he's looking to make a move. Word is his boys shot up that store on Broad and McMillan the other day. That's Zebra territory."

LeLo raised his right hand to swear on an invisible Bible. "Hey man. I don't know nothing about any of that. I just rent cars."

"Yeah, OK," Hank said. "You keep pretending you don't know and I'll keep talking at you like you do."

LeLo shrugged. It was as much as Hank was going to get.

"Bodies, LeLo," he said. "Your people. People close to you. Shooting up the store was just a warning. You and I both know what's coming."

"I don't know shit 'bout any of this."

"Maybe you're thinking you can get to him first, drop a couple of his boys before he takes out any of your people. Don't, OK? Don't even go there. The chief hates bodies. As soon as we see any, we're coming down hard."

"So?"

“So help us and help yourself. Give me whatever you got on this Franks kid and I’ll run with it.”

LeLo sucked his bottom lip in as if he was looking to spit.

“Run with it like you did on my brother?” he asked.

“You’re still standing,” Hank reminded him.

LeLo scoffed, shook his head.

“Think on it, LeLo,” Hank told him. “It’s a smart move.”

“How I know you ain’t comin’ at Tavion with the same goddamn deal, tryin’ play us both?”

“Honestly?” Hank said. “I thought about it. But if both of you fall, then that creates a vacuum. And I’d rather worry about one guy at the top than a dozen young hotheads shooting everything up.”

“Man, anyone ever tell you you been in this shit too long?” LeLo asked.

“All the time,” Hank said.

People had been nudging Hank toward a career change practically since he got his badge, but he didn’t give serious thought about giving it up until he nearly lost his left leg because of a routine traffic stop. He’d been working under as “Tommy Sobchak,” an Army vet turned adult industry talent scout. Basically, “Tommy” would find girls who wanted to make a little extra money, put them in touch with directors, photographers, club managers and escort services, and negotiate their rates if they asked him to. All of that was strictly legit – he didn’t take liberties with the girls, he kept his commission

reasonable and he wasn't a pimp. His sideline was blow. If someone wanted more than just a stripper for a bachelor party, "Tommy" was the man to see.

"Tommy's" supplier was Hank's target: The Zebra. The mixed-race group had grown to become North Orange's largest drug organization. There were half a dozen sets of ragtag gangbangers working the corners in the Sugar Town projects, but The Zebra had them all beat. Thanks to guys like "Tommy," it was able to serve the 9-to-5 world, too, though "Tommy" himself was fairly low down on the pecking order. He got his shit from a mid-level dealer named Romeo, who got it from someone else further up the ladder.

That very same Romeo was out slinging a mere hour or so before Hank nearly became a cripple. Romeo didn't do street stuff — his days of working a corner were long gone. Instead, he drove around in a Cadillac, swapping packages with guys like "Tommy" in the parking lots of clubs and motels and rim shops. Dope went out, money came in. If there was ever any problem, he didn't come back on the spot with guns blazing. He simply made a call and waited for someone in the organization to take care of it.

Romeo had just finished "Tommy's" re-up and was cruising along Byrne Boulevard to make his last drop-off for the night when he swerved across the median. He retook his lane quickly, but not quickly enough to escape the notice of the rookie patrolman who pulled him over. And because Romeo liked to toké when his night was winding down, the ganja stink that flooded out of his rolled-down window gave the rookie patrolman all the P.C. he needed to call in a search of the Caddy. Romeo's last

remaining package was booked for evidence while Romeo himself was booked for a holding cell, but not before he made a call.

At the time, Hank didn't know any of that. He was in a blue-lit strip club several miles away, sitting at the bar and watching a raven-haired darling who weighed next to nothing save for up top shake her bare ass to a Nine Inch Nails song while he tried to guess her age. Nineteen? Twenty? His daughter, Carly, wasn't much younger than that. He'd fucking kill her if he ever caught her working a pole.

On nights when "Tommy" got a new package, he'd put word out to a bartender or bouncer wherever he was at that he was open for business. He'd then kick back for an hour or two, waiting to see if anyone bit. Sometimes, he'd get a hungry-eyed frat boy or a naïve executive type and "Tommy" would meet them in the men's room to discuss the sale. Whether Hank set them up for a bust, warned them off, or try to recruit them as an informant depended as much on his mood as it did on what he thought they could give him. If nobody bit, he'd log the package into evidence in the morning and set up at a different spot the following evening.

Hank was about fifteen minutes away from calling it a night when a pair of 'bangers in do-rags and throwback jerseys walked in and came right at him. He caught their reflection off the bar mirror and let his hand fall to his side like he was reaching for something. The bangers sidled up to him quickly, each taking one side, to cut off any chance of escape. The one on his right raised his shirt to show Tommy the ass-end of a pistol.

"What the hell?" Hank asked.

“Man want to holler at you,” the ’banger replied. “Don’t be startin no shit now.”

Annoyed, Hank got off his barstool, plopped a bill on the counter and followed the ’bangers out to the parking lot, where a white Land Cruiser waited. Hank thought he recognized a Zebra lieutenant in the front passenger’s seat from the surveillance photos back at the precinct. He blanked on the name, though, and the bangers shoved him into the backseat before he could get a better look at the man’s face.

“The fuck’s all this?” Hank asked.

“Shut the fuck up,” one of the ’bangers hissed, nudging him with an elbow as the SUV pulled away. Hank didn’t know what was going on, but he was confident his cover hadn’t been blown. They wouldn’t come within 100 feet of him if they knew he was a narc. That didn’t tell him what the problem was, though. He hadn’t been cutting the shit Romeo gave him, so they couldn’t complain about him giving their product a bad name and the money he sent them wasn’t marked in an obvious way. As far as he knew, he’d been a model drug dealer. So what were they getting on his ass about?

Fifteen minutes later, the SUV came to a stop in front of a warehouse off Woodrow Wilson Parkway. If it had been daylight, Hank would have had an earful of boat traffic and a good view of the water. But at well past midnight, he had no sight but the harbor lights and nothing to listen to besides his own heartbeat.

Everyone got out of the car and the lieutenant – Hank was sure that was him now – looked him over.

“What?” Hank asked, throwing his hands up in confusion. The lieutenant gave a very slight nod and Hank felt his legs being kicked out from under him. He went

tumbling to the ground face-first and broke the fall with his wrists. A hard kick to his ribs followed, sending him rolling onto his back. “Motherfucker,” he grumbled, just before a sneaker came down on his throat. There was enough pressure to keep him from getting back up, but not enough to threaten his air supply. Not yet, anyway.

“We gonna talk,” the lieutenant said. Though Hank tried not to show it, that put him at ease. It meant they weren’t going to kill him. They’d beat on him some more, probably, but if they wanted to take him out, one of the ’bangers would have put a round in his forehead by now.

“My man Romeo come at you with the package, right?”

Hank nodded, wondering what Romeo had done to get him into this mess.

“Know where he at now?”

“Not a clue,” Hank grunted.

“He in lock-up,” the lieutenant explained. “Po-lice took a package off him right after he come see you.”

“I didn’t give him up,” Hank said in a strained voice. He hoped the prick was still in custody come sunrise. Hank would have a few words with him alone, assuming the rest of these Zebra fucks didn’t beat him into a coma.

“Lyin-ass cracker,” the lieutenant said. “Get his leg.”

The ’banger who wasn’t stepping on Hank’s neck clamped a foot down on his left ankle, pinning his leg to the ground. Hank knew something painful was coming, but he wasn’t sure what form the hurt would take. If it was him, he would have used a

sledgehammer, made it brutal but quick. The lieutenant, on the other hand, opted for a baseball bat.

Anticipation twisted Hank's face into a grimace and he began to struggle and curse as the blows came raining down. The first one was the worst. It caught him just below the knee and sent white-hot tremors of pain up and down the entire left side of this body. After that, he almost got used to it.

Occasionally, the lieutenant took a break from beating on him to ask him a question. He wanted to know what else Hank told the police, who else he gave up. Hank's replies were some variation of "I didn't say anything" or "Fuck you." That only made the lieutenant swing harder and Hank hoped he'd tire himself out before he thought to switch legs.

I can make it stop any time I want, Hank thought. All he had to do was tell them who he was. They'd call bullshit at first, but he'd give them a number at the precinct and they'd check it out and they'd have no choice but to lay off. Even the dumbest 'bangers knew better than to assault a police officer in this town and the Zebra boys weren't dumb. The guys Hank worked with would forgive him for blowing his cover when they saw his leg. He'd go on medical leave, maybe even retire early with disability. He'd finally be able to spend more time with his family.

Thinking about them gave Hank the strength he needed to keep his mouth shut. Both Carly and his wife, Barbara, hated his job, hated this assignment, hated "Tommy." He'd had little contact with them for weeks, and whenever he did see them, it was contentious. "How many whores did you fuck?" was halfway expected coming from

Barbara, but to hear it from Carly's mouth just about killed him. Every day he spent as "Tommy," he came closer and closer to losing them. He would have put them through hell for nothing if he walked away before he took The Zebra down.

Never flinch, Hank told himself as the bat hammered ugly dark welts into his flesh. *You flinch and they own you*. His eyes watered and his body burned, but he continued to take the blows. Mentally, he was back at home, back to being Hank, and no baseball bat was going to take that vision from him.

At long last, the lieutenant got tired of swinging and let the bat dangle limply at his side.

"Come on, yo," he told the two 'bangers. "This motherfucker don't know shit."

Without another word, they left him to bleed and piled into the SUV. As soon as they were gone, Hank got on his cell and called for an ambulance. He passed out wondering if he'd ever be able to walk again.

Less than a week later, Hank was back on his feet. He'd suffered a fracture and plenty of contusions, but the doctors told him he wouldn't lose the leg. While he was convalescing in Frelinghuysen Regional, someone slipped him an envelope. Inside were a couple Benjamins and a folded scrap of notebook paper. The note said *330 Tues 440 State St top floor*. Beneath the instructions was a crudely drawn zebra.

Hank was ecstatic. He whooped and laughed despite the lingering pain in his leg and had to convince a nurse that no, he was not cracking up from the dope they gave him.

The address matched a penthouse owned by White Mike Cavell, one-third of The Zebra's brain trust. Hank had caught the attention of the bosses and they wanted to meet him.

His own bosses, on the other hand, took some selling.

"I don't feel comfortable putting you back out there," his C.O. told him over the phone. "Medically, you won't be cleared..."

"Fuck the doctors, boss," Hank said. "This is a glass fucking slipper. I can rest up later."

They haggled off and on for awhile. Lt. Gomlich was ex-SWAT, a Sunday School teacher, a rules-and-procedures man. It must have burned him to no end to have a cowboy like Hank working under him. Hank always thought he was a bad fit for narcotics and knew plenty who would agree with him. And Hank had just enough juice in the department to make an end-run if the lieutenant wouldn't clear him. In the end, Gomlich must have realized that too, because he gave Hank a begrudging go-ahead, vowing to make him sorry if he ended up a cripple and tried to sue the department.

Hobbling on crutches and dressed in his loud, grungy Tommy-clothes, Hank made the sit-down right on schedule. The State Street penthouse kept the organization's colors. Black furniture sat on cloud-colored carpeting and white doors bore black knobs and handles. All that was missing, Hank thought, were some gaudy stripes.

"Tommy" grabbed a chair opposite Cavell and Lester Timpkins. He knew from intel that LeLo was the other top guy in the organization, but LeLo was nowhere to be found. Hank knew better than to ask. He wasn't even supposed to know who he was meeting with, other than that they had the power and they wanted to see him.

Hank wouldn't have taken either one of them for a drug lord. White Mike was in his 30s but looked younger, a blue-eyed baby-face with a Caesar cut and no sense of style. His sweater looked like a staticky television screen. Lester was little better. His red tie and his moustache were both pencil thin. He rocked a heavy gold ring on his right hand, but was otherwise bling-free. Hank had heard that a lot of the top guys avoided a flashy wardrobe to avoid courting attention, but this was ridiculous. They dressed almost as badly as he did and "Tommy" had the excuse that he was too burned out to care.

White Mike did most of the talking at first. He apologized about their "misunderstanding" and praised "Tommy" for standing tall on the beating instead of running to the police.

"You were a Ranger, weren't you?" he asked.

"Damn right," Hank said. He'd only been an MP, but he thought serving with the 75th Rangers in Grenada added to "Tommy's" rep.

"Me, I couldn't hack it. I dicked around for two years, then I got out."

According to his service record, Cavell had been an Army supply clerk. Hank wasn't surprised — a lot of the country's top drug guys had either been in uniform or had connections to the service. The only thing about Cavell that was surprising, aside from how he dressed like a mope, was how he hooked up with Lester and LeLo.

The way Hank heard it, both Cavell and the Timpkins brothers were picked up a few years back during one of those large-scale crackdowns that happens every time there's a mayoral election; the kinds of sweeps that rack up plenty of arrests and photo ops but very few convictions. Back then, all three were mid-level guys in different

organizations. They ended up in lockdown together, pissed that their business had been disrupted by such an obvious publicity stunt. The time it took the system to process everyone who was rounded up gave them a golden opportunity to commiserate. In the end, they were both cleared and The Zebra popped up on the radar not long thereafter. Hank got a good laugh when he heard that one.

“So listen here, Ranger,” White Mike continued. “Me and my partner got a little proposition for you.”

“Romeo gonna be out the game for awhile,” Lester said. “We need someone to step up.”

“What?” Hank asked. “You gonna give me a Caddy to ride around in?”

“Naw, they be lookin’ for that shit. But you get around. Them clubs and titty bars. All we sayin’ is maybe you get around a little more.”

Hank grinned. They were offering him a promotion. That was good news for “Tommy,” but even better news for Hank and everyone listening in. He’d gone into the meeting wearing a body mic. He’d figured the beating he took put him miles above suspicion and he wouldn’t have this kind of access to the Zebra’s top guys again.

“How much you figure I can make on this?” he asked, eagerly licking his lips.

“That depend on you,” Lester told him.

For the next half hour, they talked numbers. Instead of buying from someone like Romeo, “Tommy” would be selling. They’d give him a certain number of packages and expect a certain amount back every week. If he cleared more than the minimum, that was

more money in his pocket, but if he brought in less, he was responsible for making up the difference.

Hank liked what he was hearing, but he didn't want to appear too eager, so he did what came natural to him: he argued.

"Look, I'm a new face to a lot of these people," he explained. "They don't know me, they don't trust me, maybe they don't want to buy from me right away. I might have to lower the price just to get them to bite. Why not lower the bar for me the first week, huh?"

White Mike nodded. "I hear you, bro, but the bar stays where it is. Word gets around that we're making adjustments for you, then everybody's gonna want us to make adjustments for them too. Tell you what, though. You fall short the first week and we'll cover it. But..."

"But don't you be tryin to lowball us now," Lester cautioned. "Turns out you have a real good week, we gonna want a taste."

"Fair 'nuff," Hank said. The numbers didn't matter to him. He had them dead to rights and that was just for show. They finished negotiating, shook hands and parted company. The next time Hank saw them, they were in front of a judge.

By the time the Zebra trial rolled around, the crutches were gone and so was "Tommy." Hank had cut his hair, shaved off his beard and stopped dressing like he tumbled out of a closet circa 1976. All that remained was a slight limp and a lot of fucked-up memories.

Hank had been surprised that there even *was* a trial. The wire gave him White Mike and Lester cold and his casework was enough to bring charges on more than a dozen soldiers, dealers and lieutenants. He figured The Zebra could afford a top-notch defense attorney who could wrangle a favorable plea bargain. Why risk things in open court?

Hank got his answer in the form of a subpoena. The defense wanted him to testify about his dealings as Tommy Sobchak.

“They want to get you on the stand so they can sling mud at you,” an assistant prosecutor explained. “They figure they can score points with a jury by making the police look bad.”

“Let ‘em try,” Hank said. “I’m no angel, but the wire’s clean.”

They tried. Lead counsel for The Zebra was a jockey-sized Jew with effeminate features and thinning hair. Once he got talking, however, he turned into a bulldog. He grilled Hank about excessive force complaints from years ago, introduced sworn statements from bought-off hookers that made “Tommy” out to be a pimp and brought in a cleaned-up junkie to testify that “Tommy” sold him a bad dose. It was weak shit and the prosecutors destroyed it on cross, but that didn’t cause the defense to let up any.

Only once did Hank come close to losing his temper. He’d been up on the stand for what felt like hours with the Jew lawyer yammering about dates and names he could only half-remember. He’d been called everything from a death merchant to a liar to a pimp, but the prosecutors had prepared him as best as they could for the onslaught. The longer he held the hot seat though, the tougher it was for him to say “I have no

recollection” or “Not that I remember” or “No, that’s not correct.” He wanted to kick the Jew lawyer’s teeth in. The next question came at him – something about his last bank statement – and he let himself snap just a little.

“Buddy,” he said. “I’m down there running with the bulls. You can’t be squeaky clean and do what I do.”

Someone on the jury chuckled. The Jew lawyer asked for and was granted a brief recess and the prosecutors wasted no time jumping on Hank for the out-of-turn remark. They were worried that it would open up a new line of questioning and they weren’t sure how to respond accordingly.

But more questions never came. Hank was excused not long after court resumed session, the Jew lawyer having failed to break him. A week later and the trial would be over, guilty verdicts all around.

As Hank stepped down from the stand, he caught LeLo Timpkins eyeballing him from the back of the courtroom, a veteran hunter sizing up a ten-point buck. At the defense table, Lester and White Mike frowned and fretted as if he were a girl who stood them up for a date. Hank couldn’t help but throw a smile at them when he walked past. He thought about saying something like “Gotcha” or “That was for the leg,” but the prosecutors were watching him and he didn’t want them bitching to his superiors about his courtroom conduct. So he let that smile hang, hoping it would stay with them as they took their partnership from the penthouse to the state prison in Trenton. He would be a very old man, if not a dead one, when they were eligible to see daylight again.

A few days after the verdict came down, Hank was in dress blues for a departmental awards ceremony. He hated wearing the uniform. It never felt right on him – stiff and clean and smacking of formality — and it felt even worse as he stood ramrod straight between two other soon-to-be-decorated officers while the gasbag chief prattled on about bravery and service. But when the time came, he smiled graciously as the medal was draped over his neck, gave the chief’s hand a good, firm shake and tried to act as if the applause that accompanied his name actually meant something.

Barbara and Carly were there and they were pretending too, pretending to be happy for him. Hank had been at home on leave until shortly before the trial started and he knew he was driving them crazy. He made for a lousy homebody. He thought he’d enjoy being able to sit in front of the TV with a cold beer in his hand and his family gathered around him, but that kind of scene never materialized. Carly and Barbara were busier than he thought they would be and there was never anything on TV worth watching.

To fill the time, he took to fixing things. At first, it was just minor repairs – adding a new shelf in the kitchen, touching up the paint around the bathroom mirror. Eventually, he moved on to weatherizing the house and putting new locks on all the doors. Barbara got on him about the noise he was making, he accused her of letting the house go to hell and misplacing his tools.

When they weren’t arguing about his repairs, they were fighting about her shopping. To Hank, it seemed excessive. “You spent *how* much?” he asked after he spotted her in a new pea coat and an unfamiliar pair of shoes.

“You never cared before,” she replied.

“I was busy then,” he grumbled. When he was “Tommy,” he made sure some money went to Barbara every few weeks and that was it. He never asked her how she spent it, never got a look at a credit card bill, never gave it a second thought, really. It was ridiculous to worry about domestic expenditures when he was trying to convince some ponytail-wearing scumbag of a club owner that the girl he was fronting for was all-natural and wouldn’t show up to work stoned. But now that he was Hank and home again, there was no avoiding it. Every dollar Barbara spent reminded him of the beating he took to earn it.

Hank’s frustration spread to Carly as well. He tried to do the father thing and ask her about school and hobbies (though not boys – he wasn’t ready to hear about that yet), but it had been so long since he’d been a teenager that none of it made any sense to him. Instead of gushing about heartthrobs and planning for prom, she quoted Nietzsche and Freud to him and talked about renaissance fairs and moving to Seattle. And when she started spending her nights out, she laughed off his attempts to reign her in.

“I’ll be fine, Dad,” she insisted just before sauntering out the door at 10 p.m. There was no use stealing her car keys because her friends gave her rides. He could follow her to a point, but the guilt he felt for treating his own daughter like a perp always made him turn back. Short of physically tackling her and locking her in a room, there was no way to stop her from leaving.

“It’s a dangerous world out there, baby,” he called after her. “Believe me, I know.”

“Yeah, you know,” Carly said. “You know all about it, huh, Dad...” And then she’d throw “Tommy” back at him and it was like being in court all over again, only this time there was no cross-examination, no one to take his side. The Jew lawyer was good, but Carly’s accusations stung Hank worse than anything the shyster threw at him.

“This isn’t working,” Barbara told him one night after Carly had gone. Hank was nursing a beer and watching the TV cops make his job look fun and easy. Within the past hour, he hadn’t said more than five words to his wife. Any more than that and he risked setting off an argument.

“I know,” he answered. His mind drifted back to Tommy-time, the girls digging on his long hair and bullshit war stories, Romeo calling him “my man,” the shark-like grin that came over his face every time he met someone who was looking to score some blow. All of that was light years away from his house and his wife and his daughter and in some strange way, he missed it.

“For weeks, I just wanted you to come home,” she said. “But now? God forgive me, but I got used to life without you, Hank. I...”

It occurred to him that his wife was about to confess to an affair. Hank knew he should be flying off the handle, screaming at her, calling her names, threatening to hurt the both of them. Somehow, he couldn’t bring himself to do it, couldn’t bring himself to really care. Like the beating he took, it felt like just another price he paid for doing what he did.

They were in the wait-and-see phase by the time Hank got his medal. He couldn’t picture her sticking around much longer, but they told each other they’d take it one day at

a time. If anyone asked though, everything was aces. That's why Barbara and Carly were at the ceremony: to keep the illusion going for as long as it took.

"I'm proud of you, Hank," Barbara said, running her fingers across the hard, shiny surface of the medal. He didn't bother guessing if she meant it or not.

"Listen, me and the guys are headed over to Ginty's for a round or two. Catch up with you later?"

"Be careful, Dad," Carly said, her voice full of sudden venom. "It's a dangerous world out there."

Hank felt the sting again, but it was gone a short while later, drowned out by the beers his comrades bought him. Ginty's was wall-to-wall police that day and Hank saw plenty of familiar faces. There were his fellow narcs, some brass, his old buddies from homicide and even somebody from the prosecutor's office. Hank figured they couldn't be too sore at him over his courtroom conduct. He'd only built their goddamn case for them, after all.

Hank was downing a Killian's and listening to Van Morrison's "Gloria" warble out of the jukebox when Al Franklin approached and clapped him on the back. Franklin had been his mentor and his first C.O.; a paunchy man with trumpeter's cheeks and a bone-crushing handshake who liked to play every rookie's favorite uncle. Now he was head of investigations, an administrator, a desk cop through and through.

"Hell of a job on that case, Hank," he said. "You did so good, my boy, that we're letting you pick your next assignment."

"Gomlich'll shit when he hears that."

“Gomlich will do what he’s told,” Franklin countered. “So what’ll it be? Something light? Background checks, papertrail stuff? God knows you’ve earned it.”

Hank snorted. “Are you kidding?” he said. “I can’t wait to get back out there.”

“Well, there are always some heads up in Sugartown that need busting,” Franklin joked.

“Actually, I was thinking about sticking with The Zebra.”

“The Zebra?” Franklin asked. The joviality left Franklin’s face and he took on a look of grave parental concern.

“Yeah. LeLo’s still out there and I don’t want to give him time to regroup.”

“Hank...”

“I’m not talking about any undercover stuff, Al. I’m just saying sit on LeLo and his boys awhile longer, see who’s left and what they’re doing and maybe we’ll get lucky. Maybe they’ll tip us on who’s coming up to take the power.”

Franklin sighed. Hank could tell he was about to go into worried uncle mode. That usually worked on him, but it wouldn’t that day, not when he was half-drunk, newly decorated and riding a natural high.

“Look,” Franklin told him. “I know I told you your pick. But Jesus, Hank! Think about your family. These past few months must have been rough on them. Why don’t you talk it over with Barbara and Carly before you go charging back out there?”

“They’ll be OK with it,” Hank said. He wasn’t going to wait for Barbara to make up her mind. Within a month, the house was empty and he was back on the street.

Narcotics was located on the third floor of the P.D., but when Hank got back from seeing LeLo, he stepped out of the elevator on two. Two was homicide, a madhouse. Across from the elevator, a pair of suit-and-ties hauled a handcuffed black youth into an interrogation room, the kid repeating “I didn’t do nothing” over and over again while he dragged his feet. In one of the cubicles, a foursome was at work tacking photos and cryptic scraps of paper to a board. In another, a Latino detective riffed on the politicians being worse than the murderers they were chasing while his female partner nodded sympathetically. In the background, someone yelled about the goddamn fax machine being down again.

Hank made a beeline for Lt. Kritzer’s office. He knew Kritzer, the squad’s commanding officer, from way back. He would speak to him first before he made a run at Taylor. Hank gave a brief knock on his way in and fat, fur-lipped Kritzer dropped the report he was reading next to its cousins on a paper-strewn desk. He frowned and his tongue clucked in mock-disapproval.

“Look at this Nick Nolte-looking motherfucker,” he said. “Hey Groz, you ever hear of a haircut? Or did you forget this is a police station and not some goddamn junkie’s basement?”

Hank smoothed the ends of his longish gray hair and brushed invisible crumbs off the short sleeves of his shirt. It was a pseudo-Hawaiian button-down: orange and yellow and red thrown together in angry, gaudy swirls. He wore it untucked over venerable gray slacks that were salsa-stained at the right knee.

“Hey, I do some of my best work looking like this,” he said.

“Yeah? And what kind of work would you be doing on the second floor?”

“I need a word with your boy Taylor.”

Kritzer licked his lips and leaned back. The chair groaned under his weight, but it did not topple. Hank was disappointed: he would have paid a fair penny to see him take a spill.

“Taylor, huh?” Kritzer said. “What for?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Hank said. “Best I get at him first.”

“Yeah, OK. He’s third desk, by Andrews. But Groz? He’s new. Take it easy on him.”

“Sure thing, fat man,” Hank said. “Just let me make my play.”

Kritzer’s blessing was a dismissive wave as he reached for the report. Hank took his leave and returned to the bustling murder pen. He counted three desks back and spotted a young, red-haired guy standing over the remnants of a picked-apart case file. The white sleeves of his shirt were rolled to the elbow, his hands rested uneasily on his hips and he was staring hard, as if enough concentration would cause the murder to solve itself. Hank had seen the same concentration on LeLo’s face a short while earlier.

“Taylor?” Hank asked, his badge already out.

Taylor looked up, startled.

“Hank Groznik. I work narcotics,” said Hank. “I know you’re busy, but I need a word. The L.T.’s fine with it.”

“So speak,” Taylor said. Hank thought he sounded snotty and impatient. He knew him less than a minute and he already wanted to stomp his ass.

“Whatcha got on LeLo Timpkins?” Hank asked.

“There’s an orphan I just got handed, an open-unsolved from late last year that I like him for. Not as a trigger, but definitely giving the order. Vic allegedly owed him some money.”

“Enough there to bring a charge?”

Taylor shook his head. “Not yet.”

“But you’re thinking you press him and he’ll fuck up, hand a charge right to you?”

“Something like that.”

“Well, he won’t,” Hank said. “I know he won’t, but that’s beside the point.”

“What *is* the point, Detective?” he asked. “I don’t have all day.”

Hank lowered his voice and threw a fraternal arm around Taylor’s shoulder.

“Look, you’re going to get an order you won’t like and you’re gonna wonder where it came from,” he said. “I thought you should hear it straight from me. I need you to back off LeLo for awhile.”

Taylor shook the hand off of his shoulder and let his rage build until his face nearly matched his hair.

“What the hell for?” he asked. “And what makes you think you have that kind of pull?”

“Take a walk with me,” Hank said. He kept his voice low.

Taylor sighed, but followed him into a vacant interview room anyway. Hank upped his decibels as soon as the door slammed shut.

“You know who the fuck I am?” he said.

“You used to be undercover,” Taylor said. “So what?”

“More like *the* undercover,” Hank said. “I was in deep, for a long fucking time. I was there, man, running with the bulls. Brought down some *big* players. And I’ll tell you something else: I gave a lot for this department doing all that. A *lot*. I took a beating, let my leg get fucked up rather than blow my cover. The guys on four? The chief, the deputy? They remember all that. That’s where I get my pull.”

“And I’ll bet you got a commendation for it,” Taylor said. “But it has jack to do with my goddamn case.”

“Fuck your case!” said Hank. He slammed his hand hard on the metal interview table and kicked a chair into a corner with his good leg. Taylor flinched. Just like with LeLo, it was quick, but he saw it and just like with LeLo, it nearly made his day. “Fuck your goddamn case! Fuck your vic and fuck LeLo fucking Timpkins. I’m on to something bigger.”

“Like what?”

“Like Tavion Franks.”

“Who?”

Hank rolled his eyes. It wasn’t even worth getting mad anymore. Taylor wasn’t being a prick, Hank thought. He was just a dope.

“Jesus Christ, you homicide boys don’t know anything til a body drops,” he said.

“Tavion’s mid-level right now, but he’s looking to move up. Know that corner store shooting the other day?”

Taylor nodded.

“That was him behind that,” Hank explained. “No casualties ’cept for some bottles and window glass, but the next one’s gonna get bloody. You boys will have enough bodies to keep you running nonstop ’til Thanksgiving unless we shut him down quick.”

“How?” Taylor asked.

“I’m gonna run LeLo, that’s how,” Hank said. “I’m gonna get him to hand me what I need on the Franks kid, which is why I need you to step off him on this murder. If it means that much to you, we can come back on LeLo later, after Franks is out of the way.”

Taylor shook his head. “That’ll never work,” he said. “Timpkins won’t give us anything useful.”

“Yeah?” Hank asked. “All of the sudden, you’re an expert? What do you know about him anyway?”

“I know he runs a limo place downtown. I know he has a couple of priors, but never did hard time. I know him and his brother used to be part of one of the drug organizations...”

“‘Part of one of the drug organizations’?” Hank mimicked. “Jesus, man, the fucking Zebra!”

Taylor arched an eyebrow. “Zebra?”

“Mike Cavell, LeLo Timpkins and his brother, Lester. The Zebra. As in, black and white together. They ran drugs, guns, underground casinos, shit all over this town. They aren’t what they were, but they aren’t done yet either.”

“And you want to protect what’s left by taking out the competition?” Taylor said.

Hank shook his head and looked at the floor. The less he saw of Taylor’s face, the less tempted he’d be to take a swing.

“In a perfect world, I’d take them both out,” he said. “But the fact is, Tavion Franks is an easier get. He’d almost have to be.”

“Yeah?” Taylor asked.

“Let me tell you something about old LeLo,” Hank said. “About two-and-a-half, three years ago, toward the end of my run as Tommy Sobchak, I’d gotten in so far that The Zebra wanted me to move a package for them. The fuck if I’m gonna say no, but I didn’t want to make it seem too easy, right? So I got a sit down to talk about the split and I wired up. This was after I nearly lost my goddamn leg, so I wasn’t worried about anyone getting suspicious on me. Anyway, the meet happens and White Mike and big brother Les show up, but no LeLo. Motherfucker’s sick with the flu. You believe that? Less than a year later, the other two are put away for a good goddamn while, but LeLo? Still out there. Because of the flu. He’s too goddamn lucky, that’s what he is.”

“So he’s slippery,” Taylor said. “I’ll buy that. But I still don’t like it. You’re pressuring me off LeLo so he can keep The Zebra running. What the hell? We’re police, not players.”

“Hey,” Hank said. “I know him and I know this game. End of the day, there will still be a bad guy wearing cuffs. Think on that, Taylor. Think on it and mark my fucking words.”

Taylor sighed.

“What?” Hank asked.

“You,” Taylor said. “If I was you and I had the bad leg and all those collars, I’d cash in and write a book. I wouldn’t be looking to get into more trouble.”

“Yeah, well you aren’t me,” Hank said. “Besides, this is what I do. There’s no trouble in it if you know what you’re doing.”

“You sure about that?”

Hank flipped him off and limped out of the interrogation room. Either Taylor would go for it or he wouldn’t. Hank’s gut told him Taylor would come around though. He’d made a pretty strong impression.

With daylight waning and traffic threatening to clog the city’s veins, Hank took off and headed for Chelsie’s. Chelsie had briefly been one of “Tommy’s” girls, but it didn’t take Hank long to figure out she was after him because he dealt and not because she really wanted a gig at Satin Dolls. It was all over her body language: the way she turned away slightly when he discussed her options, the way she twitched and shook when she thought he wasn’t looking, the way she said “Sign me up, chief,” with patently fake enthusiasm.

When she finally made her play and tried to score some blow, Hank badged her, but he didn't take her in. It wasn't worth ruining her life over some piddling charge. Besides, he felt sorry for her. Chelsie was a good-looking kid: early 20s, blonde curls, button nose and puppy dog eyes. That and a little luck would get her places.

He decided to make her an informant instead. Hank put her in one of the clubs and told her to keep an ear open for what people were saying about Tommy Sobchack. She also agreed to hype his reputation. Anybody asked about drugs, she'd tell 'em "Tommy" was the man to see. When his undercover work wrapped up, he gave her a number to call if she wanted some real work.

Hank didn't come around again until things were falling apart with Barbara. There were a dozen places he could have gone for an easy lay, but he wanted the companionship, too – someone to listen to his war stories and cook him eggs in the morning. He figured Chelsie would oblige him. She owed him that much.

It turned out that she was just as lonely as he was. Cleaned up and working steadily, she had too much self-respect to hang around the kinds of scumbags she wouldn't have objected to a few years ago. But she wasn't ready to start chasing square guys yet. She didn't want to risk one of them finding out about her old life and bailing on her. Hank already knew all there was to know. That, she told him, made him a good fit for now.

Her one rule was that she got to keep calling him Tommy.

"Hank sounds old," she told him.

Beat from yelling at Taylor, Hank grabbed a High Life out of Chelsie's fridge and half-collapsed onto her ugly olive loveseat, where she sat turning the pages of *Entertainment Weekly* near an underpowered table lamp and tried not to bite her nails. He threw an arm around her too-thin body and squeezed gently. He could feel her ribs. He made anorexic jokes on occasion, but kept his mouth shut this time.

Chelsie pushed him away regardless and they ended up talking shop. Her clerical job bored them both, so his world – cops and perps and wits and vics and a veritable shower of acronyms – ruled the hour. He told her all about LeLo and Taylor and his plan to bring Tavion Franks to ruin.

“LeLo'll go for it, no doubt,” he said.

“Didn't you, like, testify against his brother?” Chelsie asked. She kept her attention divided between the conversation and the magazine. Hank knew better than to try to snatch the latter from her.

“And now he's in charge,” Hank told her. “Besides, you should have seen the look in his eyes when I mentioned Franks. Bad fucking blood there, I can tell.”

“What about the other guy? Tanner?”

“Taylor,” Hank corrected. “Pain in the ass, but I think I got through to him. He'll probably wanna do some asking about me. Kritzer, Andrews and the rest of them murder cops'll vouch. Once he lets up on LeLo, I think I can get the Franks kid shut down in about a week, maybe two.”

“What if it takes longer?” Chelsie asked. “I mean, what if LeLo decides to be stubborn or his info isn't any good?”

Hank shrugged. “Then I turn up the pressure. Hell, maybe I’ll feed Franks a little something, see if it makes him jump the gun on whatever he’s got planned for LeLo. That’ll get me some cooperation.”

“Hmm,” Chelsie said. At first, he thought she’d seen something in the magazine, but then he realized it was directed at him.

“What?” he asked.

“You know, Tommy, if you want to gamble this badly, you could always take me to Vegas.”

He threw up his hands in defeat and rose to get another beer. “Like a broken fucking record today,” he muttered.

Hank had been out of bed the next morning just long enough to throw some pants on when he heard Chelsie calling for him. Her “Tommy!” shattered windowpanes inside his still-tired head.

“Christ,” he muttered as he limped his way into her tiny kitchen. Vegas sounded like a good idea just then, but only if he could leave her there.

“Detective Groznik?”

The voice was deep and unfamiliar and Hank had to look past Chelsie to see the black detective standing at the door. Save for the badge, he was a dead ringer for Kwame Kilpatrick, the crook who used to run Detroit.

“Cal Grissom from the I.A.,” he said. “I need for you to come with me to the station, Detective.”

Hank scoffed. Internal affairs had been at him before, once over a dealer he allegedly shook down and once over some coke he allegedly swiped from evidence to supplement a reverse buy and once over some other thing he could hardly remember. Irritating as it was, he considered it just another part of the job.

“Don’t you guys usually come in pairs?” Hank asked. It was a line yanked from some movie he’d seen, but damn if he could remember which one.

“I’d bring my partner, but he’s working under today,” Grissom said. “You know how that is.”

Hank nodded. He knew better than anybody.

“It’s OK though,” Grissom said. “You and Glenn already met anyway.”

Taylor?, former Tommy thought. *Taylor*, he thought as the bile rose in his throat and his good leg felt as weak as his bad. *Taylor!*

“You probably want to call some of your friends on the fourth floor,” Grissom said, big round smile on his big round face. “That’s fine. I should tell you that they won’t help you though. We have you on tape, Detective, offering to interfere with an open homicide investigation on behalf of a suspected drug dealer. You’re done.”

He looked to Chelsie for some kind of sympathy, but all he could see in her eyes was longing for the bright lights of Vegas.

Back at the station, they hauled him into an interrogation room and fed him weak coffee and accusations. They wanted to know how long he’d been doing favors for LeLo Timpkins, what he was being paid, what else he was covering up. It was all bullshit. They

didn't have anything to charge him with. Besides, Gomlich knew what he was up to every step of the way. But they had to put up a good front, so he was suspended from active duty until they could formally clear him.

When he was done being grilled, Hank took the elevator up to four. He hobbled past a bored-looking receptionist and headed straight for Al Franklin's office.

"What the fuck, Al?" he said, helping himself to a chair unannounced and uninvited.

Franklin seemed ready for him. "Hello, Hank," he said. "I.A. done with you?"

"For now," Hank grumbled. "Suspended pending investigation. I told 'em 'check my financials, you won't find shit.'"

"I know they won't."

"Then why..."

Franklin unclasped his meaty hands, spread them out on the desk in front of him and sighed. He was going into worried uncle mode again, but Hank was too mad and too old to fall for it.

"This has got to stop," Franklin told him.

"What?" Hank asked.

"This," Franklin said, waving his hand over Hank's seated, slovenly form.

"What do you want, a suit and tie?" Hank protested. "For chrissakes, Al, I'm out on the street."

"Hank..."

"I've got to fit in."

“Hank, you aren’t undercover anymore.”

Hank flinched. He didn’t think Franklin noticed or even cared, but he sure did. It was a loss of nerve, flinching, and nerve was all he had to go on.

“I know that, Al,” he said. “But I’m still out there, doing what I do. And this Franks kid...”

“Franks, right,” Franklin said. “Six months ago, it was DeAngelo Moore. Last year, it was the Gomez brothers. Any time someone gets close to knocking off The Zebra, you shut them down. You tell anyone who will listen that they are bad guys, that they have to go. But so is Timpkins. So are half a dozen other thugs you aren’t out there chasing while you’re playing this game. Enough is enough already.”

Hank thought back to the trial, the hurt, betrayed looks on Lester and White Mike’s faces when he left the stand. He’d had no sympathy for them then. Guys like Lester and White Mike were asking to get caught. If Hank didn’t bring them down, someone else would have. But talking to Franklin made Hank see things differently. It wasn’t the getting caught and buried that stung the most, he realized. It was having that certainty – the names and faces you knew, the people you could swear by – ripped from you.

“Now look,” Franklin said. He leaned over his desk and beckoned Hank to move in closer, which he did. “I know you’re sore. Gomlich ratted you out and I.A. planted Taylor to nail you and none of that’s on the up-and-up. I also know what this Zebra thing means to you. I know it’s more than just the leg. But you have *got* to let it go. Take some

time, get yourself straightened out and you'll be back on active duty before you know it. You have some good work left in you, Hank."

Hank considered the request as well as the man making it. Franklin was at his wedding. He'd been the first one to buy Hank a drink when Carly was born and the first one to propose another drink when Barbara served the divorce papers. He'd been at that awards ceremony and clapped Hank on the back and told Hank he'd earned the right to do as he pleased. And now Franklin of all people was asking him to make all his sacrifices meaningless, to just walk away.

"Is that an order, Captain?" Hank asked, his voice as icy as a Nova Scotia winter.

Franklin pushed himself back into his chair and dropped the uncle routine. "Yes, Detective," he said. "You bet it is."

Hank took a cab back to Chelsie's and picked up his car. She was nowhere in sight; at work, probably, or whatever passed for work in her life. It occurred to him that he hadn't really made much of an effort to get to know her recently. She could actually be committed to her job and making something of herself, but she was still ex-cokehead/snitch/piece of ass as far as he was concerned. He knew he would not be taking her to Vegas or anywhere else, for that matter.

A bar spoke to him, but it was too early in the day, so he opted for home instead. He navigated a tangle of like-named side streets and ran a few stop signs before pulling in to his oil-spotted driveway. He always parked on the right side, even though he no longer had to worry about Barbara's car taking up the left. His lawn had gone to shit, all faded

and overgrown, and he supposed he would have to cut it before his neighbors complained again. He would be seeing more of them now that he was off active duty.

Inside, Hank slapped together a sandwich and set it down on a newly-cleared patch of kitchen table, displacing old newspapers and unopened mail in the process. He used up the last of his mayo and drank tap water because he couldn't remember how long the solitary beer can had been sitting there.

When he was done eating, Hank reached for his off-white wall phone. He first considered calling Barbara, but then thought better of it. What would he even say? "Guess what honey, I'm done being Tommy?" Too late for that now. Besides, he didn't want to risk getting that asshole realtor she'd left him for.

He dialed long distance instead, to Berkeley, where Carly took his tuition money but never his calls. He had her latest number pinned to a small corkboard by the phone, but he didn't know if it was still any good. These days changed their phone numbers more than the drug dealers he chased.

The phone rang once and Groznik flinched again, no longer caring that he did so. Would Carly be in class now? When did that semester end, anyway? And what if he did get through? Last time, she'd told him in a fit of tear-choked outrage, that he'd cared more about being Tommy than being her father and that she didn't want him calling again. The phone rang and rang and rang.